

COWBOY PROFESSIONALISM:
A CULTURAL STUDY OF BIG-MOUNTAIN TOURISM IN THE LAST FRONTIER

By

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

Arctic and Northern Studies

University of Alaska Fairbanks

August 2017

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Abstract

Geographical features and cultural traits may influence the character of big-mountain tourism in Alaska. For example, Alaska's wild landscape, rich climbing and skiing history, and cultural mythos of wilderness and frontier fostered its status as a major destination for niche big-mountain tourism. Growth in the industry since the 1980s has been phenomenal, though a change threatens the identity of mountain guides of the region, demanding they accept international standards for their self-regulating and uniquely Alaskan version of big-mountain tourism.

This research project explored big-mountain niche tourism in Alaska, considering the influences of wilderness and frontier concepts on the tourism culture and examining guides' and clients' motivations for participation in the industry. I queried clients and guides at two guiding services, the Alaska Mountaineering School and its Denali mountain climbers, and Alaska Powder Descents and its Coast mountain heli-skiers. The quantitative client survey assessed participant motivations for engaging in big-mountain tourism, for hiring a guide, and for travelling to engage in mountain tourism. The qualitative guide interview asked guides their motivations for working in big-mountain tourism, their experience with the management of big-mountain risk, and changes they had observed over time in the industry. I am a professional mountain guide and instructor in Alaska and use this experience as a third data point.

The findings showed that Alaska's big-mountain tourism offers individuals a transcendental, sublime, yet physical encounter, one that is part of a globalized political and economic system. Except for the guides themselves, the high mountains are generally

accessible only to those who are at the high end of the socioeconomic spectrum. Gender is also a defining characteristic of the industry, as the guiding ranks and the clientele in Alaska's big-mountain tourism are overwhelmingly male. For guides, the frontier mythos of intrepid and rugged individualism is a powerful motivator, an identity construction that relates well with the depictions of the region in early literature, and in images promoted by the tourism industry. Clients on the other hand may come to Alaska because it is geographically exceptional, but they are not as enamored of the frontier ideology that resonates so deeply with many permanent residents.

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Acknowledgments

A number of individuals and groups inspired this project on mountaineering and place-identity.

Most immediately, my parents and brother, Margery, Joseph, and Tristan Wagner; with their guidance and support I had the privilege to grow up here in Alaska and the encouragement to pursue a life lived out of doors. These people are my foundation, offering room to grow and fail, and the expectation to live well.

Andy Sterns, his optimism and sense of humor stimulate my own.

Haley Poole, who encouraged me to write.

Terrence Cole, his concept-based lectures and outdoor enthusiasm shore up my belief that Alaska is worth thinking about.

Kevin Krein, Jacek Maselko, Eran Hood, and the University of Alaska Southeast (UAS). Thanks for giving me the opportunity to grow and work at UAS, an ideal place for Outdoor Studies.

Marsha Sousa, who valued my work and demanded I finish this degree.

Bjorn Dihle, BJ Robinson, and Ben Dobrovolsky, for embodying the 'arctic individualism' that Bob Marshall found so remarkable in Wiseman all those years ago.

Melis Coady, Mike Janes, Rob Gowler, Colby Coombs, and the crew at the Alaska Mountaineering School (AMS), for taking me in as a kindred blue-collar mountain person, and for the cultural conversations that motivated this project.

The owners, clients and guides at AMS and Alaska Powder Descents, who let me interview and survey them, representatives of a living mountain culture.

Stan Justice, and various instructors in the mountain and avalanche community,

who offered me the tools to communicate and facilitate mountain-related education.

Mary Ehrlander, Eric Heyne, Glenn Wright, Will Elliot, Richard Simpson, Alex Simon, Kenneth Barrick, Sarah Ray, and countless others; for talking with me, reading this work, and sharing their enthusiasm for the practices of the mind.

My students, teaching assistants, and clients, whose passion for outdoor pursuits and enjoyment of small-group experience continues to inform my own.

My extended family, whose interest and tolerance for their northern cousin is endearing and encourages my belief in a local-global sense of place.

My climbing partners, their sense of adventure and willingness to continue to accompany me on trips inspires and reaffirms my commitment to outdoor adventure.

Alaska's first responder and medical professionals: surgeons, nurses, physical therapists, and their assistants, who put me back together.

The kind people who reached out after the bear attack: outdoor professionals, Kevin Maier, the Humanities Department and so many colleagues from the University of Alaska, concerned Alaskans, friends from school and from various periods of my life, Mike Miller, Stephanie Quigley and the Juneau yoga community, and many people who I have not yet had the opportunity to formally meet. Their incredible support helped me heal.

And finally, Alaska, for its mountains, rivers and ocean, its brown bear, caribou, and wild salmon, and its tightly woven human community, one at a critical and historical moment. We have the opportunity to imagine and write this exceptional region's future. That this landscape informs my place identity should come as no surprise; it is with an incredible sense of fortune that I call Alaska home.

Chapter 1 Introduction, A Call to Action

Heavy clouds obscured the mountain pass above me. Half way up the historic Golden Staircase, the steepest part of the Chilkoot Trail, my energy and awareness was at an all-time high. One of two passes used to breach the rugged Coast Mountains and access the Klondike by gold stampededers a hundred years ago, Chilkoot Pass is reached only after climbing three thousand feet of vertical relief. Jumbled talus, slippery footing, and loaded backpacks make climbing this section treacherous. More than its physicality, the terrain is exposed—a fall here can only end in disaster.

This was my first backpacking adventure of significant length. The year was 1992. At ten years old, I was the youngest member of our Boy Scout troop. The inclement weather of the coastal rainforest around Dyea, so different from the boreal forest of my Fairbanks home, had saturated the first few days of our trek. Wet and tired, I was buoyed along by the reassuring exuberance of my dad.

Climbing through the clouds that day twenty-six years ago, something clicked. The past days' weary miles dropped away. I felt light and alive, energized by the stormy weather and the raw beauty of an alpine landscape. Climbing the Golden Staircase that June some years ago enlivened me; it set the stage for my life.

This thesis is a cultural study of big-mountain tourism in Alaska, focusing on both clients and guides. It is based on extensive interviews, surveys, and my own personal life experience spanning almost forty years in Alaska. What follows here is an analysis of the motivations of outdoor professionals, specifically Alaskan big-mountain guides, my colleagues and friends, participants in a niche form of Alaska tourism, who are attracted

to climb, ski and guide in the region's exceptional geography. The paper also examines the motivations of big-mountain clients, individuals financially able to participate in leisure activities like climbing and skiing, and physically and emotionally fit for the challenges of the mountain environment.

Despite guides and mountaineers outsized role in Alaskan mythmaking, documenting their motivations is surprisingly difficult. Human motivations are never one-dimensional. As my research shows, guides are indeed acting out a seemingly romantic, anachronistic role—styling themselves as self-reliant “frontiersman” or “pioneers” who are confronting “wild nature” in its “rawest” setting. Yet, the geographical isolation of big-mountain tourism in Alaska means that the self-reliance is often real, the climbs or ski lines really are *terra incognita*, and it is easy to find oneself on the edge of survival, hours or even days away from help. To illustrate this point, I begin with an account of my own experience as an Alaskan outdoor professional.

I teach Outdoor Studies at the University of Alaska Southeast, on the Juneau campus of the University of Alaska, a position I have held since 2006. The focus of my work is outdoor leadership, a topic on which I teach a two-semester seminar course that includes numerous field outings. I also teach a variety of outdoor skills classes ranging from backcountry navigation, swift water travel, rock and ice climbing, glacier travel, mountaineering, avalanche assessment, to alpine touring. These classes focus on small-group communication, risk management, environmental ethics, and geography. I regularly lead expeditions of Outdoor Studies graduates to wild parts of Alaska and the world, and have had the privilege to share experiences with my students and colleagues on the high mountains and remote vistas of the Juneau Icefield, the Brooks Range's

Arrigetch, Denali, the Chugach and Wrangell Mountains, the Ecuadorian Andes, and the Japanese Alps. Students in Outdoor Studies degree programs earn a Certificate in Outdoor Skills and Leadership, or a Bachelor of Liberal Arts in Outdoor and Adventure Studies, and easily find jobs in local adventure tourism.

I grew up in the hills outside of Fairbanks, Alaska, the second largest urban area in the state and was drawn from childhood to the outdoors and Denali, the giant peak visible on clear days 160 miles to the south. My first experiences with the benefits of wild natural areas occurred on our family property, a gentle slope of climax boreal forest acreage, mostly birch and white spruce. Time spent in the woods around my home helped me feel calm and centered from an early age. I spent my early summers and winters on expeditions with my parents and, later, with the Boy Scouts. It was a mark of pride that we camped outside every month of the year, and learned to make snow caves at minus forty degrees. In the winter, my brother and I walked to Weller Elementary School, regardless of the weather.

Nordic skiing, more than any other sport, helped mold my backcountry interest. I remember skiing with my dad as early as age four. Later, my parents gave me a mountain bike, which I rode nearly every day from our house to the Birch Hill Cross-Country Ski Trails. Besides feeling physiologically satisfied after time spent outside, I discovered that exercise, particularly the long, aerobic variety, made me feel psychologically good. The thrill of whipping down hills on my skis or bike was second to the qualities of mental calmness I felt afterward.

In high school I climbed the local granite outcrop known as Angel Rocks with instructor Stan Justice, a noted mountaineer, marathon athlete, and alpinist. Inspired by

his example, I was determined to integrate my educational pursuits with a lifestyle of outdoor adventure, a dream I share with many who call Alaska home. My education was a holistic approach to the liberal arts and the practical craft of living the life I was inventing as I went along. While earning an interdisciplinary degree at the University of Alaska in natural science and social science, I worked as a wildland firefighter, day guided on the glaciers of the Juneau Icefield, and interned in 2003 for two months in Nepal with a Himalayan mountain climbing company on peaks higher than any in North America. I climbed Denali for the first time in 2005 with my dad, and began guiding with Talkeetna-based AMS in 2008. Overall I have been fortunate to participate in about two-dozen major expeditions in Alaska and around the world.

But nothing quite prepared me for what happened on April 18 of 2016, when I was mauled by a sow grizzly bear with one cub while descending with a class of eleven students from a mountaineering expedition on Mount Emmerich in Southeast Alaska. It was a shock for many reasons, a black swan of a bear attack, like a snowstorm in Florida on the 4th of July. By the calendar the bear should not have been there. It was at least a month before the brown bears in the area would normally come out of hibernation. Biologists I talked with later, including the Alaska Department of Fish and Game scientist who investigated my incident, reported that because the temperatures were mild, many grizzlies that winter never even went to sleep. There was an unusually low snowpack that season, and I might have skied over her den, which was covered by less than six inches of snow at the time.

Thankfully no one else in the class was hurt, or endangered by the sow, and because I remained conscious I effectively ran my own evacuation. Nevertheless I was

completely dependent on the composure and skills of my students and without them might not have survived. With their help, we organized a rescue, transported me hundreds of vertical feet down a mountain, and avoided further injury from the bear. Within two hours I was airlifted by helicopter; four hours and twenty minutes after the attack I was in an Anchorage hospital. In retrospect, I know how lucky I am to be alive, but even though we faced such a random, high consequence event, thanks to our preplanning, extensive training, and good fortune, the execution of the rescue was the best-case scenario, a textbook example of how it had to be done.

Initially an orthopedic surgeon told my mother I might not walk again. Fortunately the doctor was wrong. Four months later, after thirteen surgeries and intensive physical therapy, I returned to work at the University of Alaska Southeast, leading my first major mountaineering expedition in the high country of Alaska almost exactly one year to the date after the bear attack. Surviving a bear attack allows me a unique lens into the efficacy of outdoor education. This experience with the bear has shaped my personal and professional life, and made me appreciate all the more what I find meaningful for myself and my students in the mountains of the far north.

The random nature of my encounter with the grizzly, who lived up to her name *Ursus Horribilus*, demonstrates the truth that in the natural world we humans do not make the rules. This is especially true in the mountains. The high mountain environment in Alaska, including the Alaska Range, Brooks Range, and Coast Range, is almost completely uninhabited, unlike more southerly systems, such as the Himalayas, Alps, Andes, and Rockies. Because of Alaska's high latitude, humans are only visitors at altitude here. Apparently only one settlement in Alaska was ever located above 3,000

feet – the gold rush town of Chisana on the northern edge of the Wrangell Mountains – and most other communities are at 2,000 feet or less, with probably 99 percent of the Alaska population residing lower than 500 feet above sea level. My hometown of Fairbanks, the second largest urban area in Alaska, sits at 446 feet, which is lower than St Louis, Cleveland, Chicago, or Detroit. Even though they may live in the shadows of the highest mountains in North America, Alaskans are lowlanders, which make the pull of the mountains on the horizon so much more enticing. The mountains are so close, yet so different from the daily world in which Alaskans live.

We love nature sports such as mountaineering partly because despite our best efforts, the natural world is uncontrollable. Our preparation and decision-making can enable us to minimize the risk, but ultimately we are not in control of anything but ourselves. Humility is the secret to staying alive, as arrogance sooner or later leads to catastrophe. The environment sets the scene and dictates the pattern of the contest, which can change minute-to-minute, even second-to-second.

The challenge of the high mountains is two-fold: conditions can change so rapidly that experienced guides must be forecasters and “nowcasters,” reading clouds, snow conditions, avalanche hazard, wildlife patterns, etc. both to protect the members of the expedition and to limit the impact on the environment. And more problematically, learning how to travel and live safely in the mountains is a challenging endeavor, as feedback in the natural world is generally positive until something goes wrong. As Vicky Ho, the author of *Cautionary Tales*, a regular column in *Alaska Dispatch News*, related last month, “I’ve learned more from outdoor failures than successes.” Experienced mountaineers understand that the alpine zone they love to recreate in is in fact a wicked

learning environment, and that learning from failure in the mountains can be a hazardous and slippery slope. “Success in the mountains,” wrote Ho, “can be a trap, mentally. It leaves me thinking I did everything right.”¹ Success may reinforce hazardous behaviors without immediate or guaranteed consequence, lulling the outdoor enthusiast into a false sense of confidence.

And surviving failure, when something has gone terribly wrong, is sometimes as much instinct as training. Jack London, in his short story, “The Unexpected,” related that:

It is a simple matter to see the obvious, to do the expected. The tendency of the individual life is to be static rather than dynamic, and this tendency is made into a propulsion by civilization, where the obvious only is seen, and the unexpected rarely happens. When the unexpected does happen, however, and when it is of sufficiently grave import, the unfit perish. They do not see what is not obvious, are unable to do the unexpected, are incapable of adjusting their well-grooved lives to other and strange grooves. In short, when they come to the end of their own groove, they die. On the other hand, there are those that make toward survival, the fit individuals who escape from the rule of the obvious and the expected and adjust their lives to no matter what strange grooves they may stray into, or into which they may be forced.²

London eloquently expressed the need for creative problem solving and quick adaptation during survival moments in the natural world. My experience last summer during an unexpected bear attack offers a harrowing first-hand perspective in support of such

¹ Vicky Ho, “Cautionary Tales: Embrace Failure,” *Alaska Dispatch News*, April 21, 2017.

² Jack London, “The Unexpected,” *McLure's Magazine*, August 1906, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://www.online-literature.com/london/105/>.

claims, and illustrates how the natural world is truly a wicked learning environment, one that can be hard to survive and learn from.

At roughly 12:30p on that day last April I was ascending to my students on alpine touring skis. Without realizing it I had skied over a sow brown bear's den. The bear first appeared on the steep slope fifteen feet below. I heard a rustling noise, and looking toward it was surprised to see a bear climbing toward me. My initial response was a conditioned one: I waved my ski poles in the air and made myself as large as I could, yelling loudly, "Hey bear, get away bear!" The time from my first visual sighting to her attack was maybe twenty seconds. She did not charge, pull her teeth back, or whumph. The bear shifted her head back and forth in an almost snakelike manner and steadily moved uphill, walking directly up to me, grabbing my right shin with her quickly moving jaws. As she pulled me down, I hit the grizzly solidly in the head with my ski mountaineering pole, and then rolled with her three hundred fifty feet down the side of the mountain. As we rolled, I threw a punch at her nose. The bear held on to me with her mouth, a fierce attachment that crushed the top of my pelvis.

After initially resisting, a voice in my head reminded me that if attacked by a brown bear, the best practice is to play dead. At almost the same time that I stopped resisting, moving my arms over my face to protect my airway, the bear released my side and took a swipe with her paw at my face, somehow understanding that this was her moment to end the fight. Her paw split my helmet in half, scratched my forehead, and left me with a black eye. In the same motion as the swipe, she bit and held onto my right arm, tossing me around as if I were a rag doll. Then, to my great fortune we rolled off a small cliff, perhaps ten feet high, separating in the air, but landing next to each other, the bear

to my right. I remained conscious throughout this unexpected tumble. The bear stood up, looked at me, climbed out of the drainage, looked at me once more, and walked away. In my mind's eye I imagined her shaking her head and muttering "good riddance." The length of this interaction and my actual contact with the wild animal was no more than two minutes.

As fortunate as I am to have survived this trial, the endeavor proves that just as experiences on wild lands offer us self-affirming moments like my climb of the Golden Staircase as a youth of ten, they also occasionally provide moments of potential self-annihilation. If I had not remembered to change my approach, to play dead and cover my airway, then the unexpected circumstance of a bear attack fourteen months ago would likely have left me dead. More to the paper's thesis, my bear encounter frames the point that big-mountain tourism is at crossroads between its rule and regulation-free cowboy past and credentialed future because as the bear illustrates, even a highly structured, credentialed environment like an Outdoor Studies classroom can give way to a cowboy moment like fighting a bear while falling off a cliff.

I do not begrudge the bear for attacking me. While out on Alaska's wild lands, bears have rights equal to mine. In an increasingly human-modified world, the existence of bears is an indicator of a complete natural ecosystem and something that I celebrate as an environmentalist. My notions about the bear's equal place on Alaska's wild landscape relate well with those expressed by Val Plumwood, an ecofeminist philosopher who was mauled by a crocodile in the mid-1980s. Plumwood recalled:

The wonder of being alive . . . has slowly faded, but some of that new gratitude for life endures, even if I remain unsure of whom I should thank. The gift of

gratitude came from the searing flash of near-death knowledge, a glimpse “from the outside” of the alien, incomprehensible world in which the narrative of self has ended . . . Thus the story of the crocodile encounter now has, for me, a significance quite the opposite of that conveyed in the master/monster narrative. It is a humbling and cautionary tale about our relationship with the earth, about the need to acknowledge our own animality and ecological vulnerability.³

I have an eco-centered view of the natural world, one shared with Plumwood and informed by our survival stories with top predators. This worldview challenges a common criticism of mountaineering, as the sport is often described as an egocentric imperial conquest. My mountain guide interviewees rebutted this claim, too. These were environmentally minded, ethically driven and eco-centered people, who like Plumwood and me reckoned their participation on Alaska’s wild lands as occurring on a more-than-human world.

One of the benefits of outdoor pursuits is the close friendships they often inspire. The overwhelming support I felt from the mountain community after my wrestle and tumble with the brown bear last summer relates directly to the power of the outdoor group dynamic. “Wilderness travelers often report enhanced feelings of connection and esprit de corps,” observed leisure scholar Mary Breunig. “Feelings of connectedness result from the mini-community created when traveling together in a natural setting.”⁴ I find Breunig’s observations to be accurate, and have been fortunate to share this type of group outdoor engagement with many people over the course of my career. The positive energy and support from my friends and colleagues helped my healing and became a

³ Val Plumwood, “Human vulnerability and the experience of being prey,” *Quadrant* 29, no. 3 (1995), 33-34.

⁴ Mary C. Breunig, Timothy S. O’Connell, Sharon Todd, Lynn Anderson, and Anderson Young, “The impact of outdoor pursuits on college students’ perceived sense of community,” *Journal of Leisure Research* 42, no. 4 (2010), 552.

metaphoric call for action. Following my recovery, I returned my attention fully to this study of big-mountain tourism in Alaska, feeling compelled to complete the analysis of this culture, and of the historical moment I believe it is currently in.

With this new motivation at hand, I returned to UAF in October of 2016 determined to flesh out the remaining components of what is now a completed research project. Alaska's status as a destination for big-mountain tourism rests on both geographic features and cultural traits. The state offers unique terrain. Nowhere else in the United States do climbers spend weeks traveling up glaciers to position on their climbing objective, an expedition format necessary for climbing Alaska's mountains.⁵ And nowhere else in the world does snow stick to such high angle terrain as that of Alaska's coastal mountains, providing superlative conditions for extreme skiing.⁶

Alaska's mystique draws guides and clients with unique characteristics specific to their mountain interest. Guides are elite, and considered the most specialized expedition climbers and extreme skiers in the world. Their clients are not mass tourism participants of the cruise ship or train and bus variety. They associate Alaska's big-mountain culture with self-reliance, a quality required in wilderness and on a frontier. Alaska is also a node in cosmopolitan networks of sport. Indeed, Talkeetna and Valdez are as iconic for big-

⁵ Expedition mountaineering is a "greater range" strategy for accessing the world's largest mountains. Besides Alaska's greater range mountains, including the Coast, Wrangell-St. Elias, and Chugach Mountains, and the Brooks and Alaska ranges, the term also applies to the Asian Himalayas, the South American Andes, and the nearly inaccessible, because of remoteness and weather, high mountains of the Antarctic continent. In Alaska and Antarctica, skied-airplanes transport expedition climbers, and their hundreds of pounds of gear, onto the mountain. In Asia and South America, yaks and burros carry the gear, and climbers walk in, sleeping with their equipment at night. Expedition mountaineering partitions the travel and climbing of the mountain into sections. In Alaska, this includes a plane approach, a walk-in section, and finally the climbing, a process that takes weeks. The average expedition to Denali is 18 days in length.

⁶ Mark Obenhaus, *Steep* (New York, Sony Classics, 2008), offers a detailed history of Valdez heli-skiing within ski culture. Alaskan extreme skiing began in the early 1990s with helicopter access to Valdez' Chugach Mountains. Snow from the Pacific Ocean falls wet and heavy on the Chugach and Coast Mountains, sticking to slopes above 45 degrees, angles where snow normally slides off. High pressure following the steady stream of on-shore storms brings clear skies and cold air, conditions that pull moisture out of the snow pack, leaving it a dry, low-density, powder that is highly desirable for skiing. This snow is surprisingly stable from avalanches. It is therefore unique, due to its low-density nature and stability on steep slope angles.

mountain enthusiasts as Chamonix, France, the birthplace of Western mountaineering. Alaska's big-mountain mystique comes as much from the solitude-inducing potential of its wild places, as its community of similarly motivated mountain sport enthusiasts.

Mountaineering as a sport first gained popularity in the world of eighteenth century Europe. Grounded in Enlightenment notions, the activity can be frightening and thereby induce a sublime experience, an adventurous, mysterious concept tied to fear and wonder, first introduced in 1757 by Irishman Edmund Burke. Outside the realm of comprehension and induced by extremes experienced in the natural world, "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*," wrote Burke. The philosopher argued that the sublime "is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling Terror always produces delight when it does not press too close."⁷

In *Mountains of the Mind*, Robert MacFarlane's sweeping history of the Western mountain concept and its cultural motives for mountaineering, he places Burke's sublime in context, explaining it as a pre-scientific understanding of the sympathetic fight or flight response produced by fear. As MacFarlane observed:

Risk has always been taken, but for a long time it was taken with some ulterior purpose in mind: scientific advancement, personal glory, financial gain. About two and a half centuries ago, however, fear started to become fashionable for its own sake. Risk, it was realized, brought its own reward: the sense of physical

⁷ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), 36, 43.

exhilaration and elation, which we would now attribute to the effects of adrenaline.⁸

MacFarlane's observations relate well to the popularization of mountaineering in Europe in the early nineteenth century, a period where Burke's natural sublime was interpreted by intellectuals and applied to various artistic and aesthetic perspectives of that era.

These new sentiments of the power and mystery of wild natural settings were eloquently articulated by the romantic and early mountain tourist Percy Shelley, who wrote "Mount Blanc" in 1817, after a trip to Chamonix, France. The first significant poem about mountain grandeur in the English language, Shelly mused:

The wilderness has a mysterious tongue
Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,
So solemn, so serene, that man may be,
But for such faith, with Nature reconcil'd;
Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal
Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood
By all, but which the wise, and great, and good
Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel.⁹

⁸ Robert MacFarlane, *Mountains of the Mind: Adventures in Reaching the Summit* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004) Ebook edition, 14-15.

⁹ Mary and Percy Shelley, "Mount Blanc," in *History of a Six Weeks' Tour through a part of France, Switzerland, Germany, and Holland* (London: T. Hookham, Jr. and C. & J. Ollier, 1817), 179.

Shelley, grappling with the unknown and deep mystery of wildness he experienced while gazing on the grandeur of Mt Blanc, set the stage for generations of European, and by the mid-nineteenth century American mountain cultural participants, individuals who appreciated and sought out the fear and adrenaline producing experiences of wild landscapes.

One hundred fifty years later, Alaska big-mountain culture, although informed by notions of the natural sublime from the eighteenth century, finds its contemporary roots in the dirt-bag American climbing scene of the 1960s. Climbers, like Patagonia clothing founder Yvon Chouinard, lived out of cars, traveling from one climbing area to another, surviving by eating out of dumpsters and selling hand-made specialty climbing equipment.¹⁰ This lifestyle allowed a generation of American alpinists to focus most of their time on ascending big, unclimbed lines. Fifty years later, Alaska, depicted in literature as a last frontier inhabited by self-reliant people living on the edge of wilderness, is an international destination for climbing the continent's highest mountains or skiing the steepest powder lines. One way to afford participation in the leisure culture of alpinism is employment in commercial big-mountain tourism. Like so many aspects of modern life, when clients pay money to guides, they make the mountaineering experience a commodity.

Guides imagine themselves as modern participants of dirt-bag culture. A sure sign of inexperience is showing up to a climb with new equipment. Duct tape holding a parka together symbolizes merit to those in-the-know while new high-fashion outdoor clothing indicates the wearer may not spend much time actually using his or her gear. As a cultural insider, an Alaskan mountain guide and life-long resident, I wonder if the

¹⁰ Nick Paumgarten, "Patagonia's Philosopher-King," *New Yorker*, September 19, 2016.

mountain experience is muddled by including people who do not have the skills to take care of themselves and therefore pay an expert to guide them. I think of poet John Haines' reflection "that we are in danger of losing Alaska to the name itself,"¹¹ and wonder whether mountain tourism commercializes Alaska's spectacular geography in a way that diminishes it. I wonder how Alaska's big-mountain tourism participants identify with the state's environment and culture, or whether they merely seek outdoor thrills. In this research project I hypothesized that they do both. Alaska is not just a destination for climbing the highest mountains or skiing the steepest powder lines; to those of us in the industry who live here, it is home.

Alaska big-mountain tourism, like the region's larger mass-tourism, is layered in notions of authenticity. Meta-stories like that of dirt-bag culture or Alaska-the-last-frontier inform the identity of locals, and working with clients can alter or reinforce mountain guides' sense that they represent the real McCoy. The real climber, like the real Alaskan, is self-reliant and independent. Clients, however, typically are quite the opposite. By definition clients are not real climbers, as they purchase the lifestyle; and they cannot access the real Alaska without an interpretive guide. Depictions of Alaska "are for the most part the superficial message of the tourist," observed Haines. "He who comes to gape, but not to understand." Continuing this reasoning, the poet wondered: "How long might it take people living here to be at home in their landscape, and to produce from that experience things that could be recognized [as legitimate depictions of the place]?"¹² By analyzing Alaskan big mountain guides and their clients, as a resident and as a mountain guide, I aim to convey a rendering of Alaska that is holistic and

¹¹ John Haines, *Living Off the Country: Essays on Poetry and Place* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981), 3.

¹² Haines, 15.

grounded in actual experience. Although this representation is as much a social construction as the imagery of Alaska-the-last-frontier that is produced by the tourism industry, my concern here is the culture of the climbing community in Alaska.¹³

With this prospect in mind, the “cowboy professionalism” of the thesis title, a term coined by AMS-B, one of my interviewees and a veteran of dozens of expeditions on the world’s highest mountains, speaks to imbedded notions of exceptionality in Alaska’s big-mountain culture. The veteran guide believed that: “Alaskan guides are self-reliant. They share a sense of pride about being Alaskan, being a guide from here. They’re hardier than the average, and enjoy the unique challenges of mountaineering in such an extreme place. There’s a cowboy professionalism up here.” Notions of Alaska as an extension of the American frontier, and as wilderness peopled by self-reliant individuals, colored how study participants, especially guides, expressed themselves and how they interpreted their big-mountain climbing and skiing.

In addition to the Alaskan mystique, a variety of physiological and psychological benefits motivate participants in big-mountain culture to climb and ski. Many feel *compelled* to engage in such demanding outdoor sports. Participants must be physically and mentally prepared for the challenges, however. Mountaineering demands athleticism. The activity requires cardiovascular aerobic strength, occasional anaerobic power, and the coordination to implement a variety of technical movements while under environmental stress, such as inclement weather or extreme temperatures. In turn, the physical demands of the mountain environment enhance participants’ fitness.

Psychological fitness is just as essential to mountaineering, and the psychological benefits equally valuable, if less obvious. Participation in big-mountain culture relates

¹³ Kevin Krein, “Sport, Nature and Worldmaking,” *Sport, Ethics, and Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (2008), 287.

well to Abraham Maslow's theory of motivation. As the psychologist noted rhetorically in 1943, "It is quite true that man lives by bread alone — when there is no bread. But what happens to man's desires when there is plenty of bread and when his belly is chronically filled?"¹⁴ Maslow's hierarchy of needs described a pyramid of necessities for human health. When basic needs like food and shelter are met, the individual focuses attention on social needs like group acceptance. After basic and group needs are fulfilled, Maslow found that the human psyche yearns for a pinnacle or peak experience that can lead to self-actualization.

The training and energy required for successful mountaineering ventures can lead to peak experiences, a reward that justifies the inherent risks of the activity. As alpinist Mark Twight observed, "The best climbers aren't necessarily the fittest or most skilled. Instead, [they] share a passion for climbing combined with the ability to exert their will and to pay attention to both internal and external conditions,"¹⁵ traits that allow their mountain activity to become a flow state, an experience that is an end in itself. Mahaly Csikszentmihalyi coined the term "flow" to express an optimal state of well-being. Mountain climbing and other nature sports create "a self-contained activity, one that is done not with expectation of some future benefit, but simply because the doing itself is the reward."¹⁶ Flow creates enjoyment, and a high degree of satisfaction in life.

The love of wild places also inspires mountain culture. As Paul Petzoldt, renowned mountaineer and founder of the National Outdoor Leadership School, recalled:

¹⁴ Abraham Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943), 375.

¹⁵ Mark Twight, *Extreme Alpinism: Climbing Light, Fast, and High* (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1999), 20.

¹⁶ Mahaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow, the Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial Press, 1990), 67.

All my life, people have asked the question, directly or indirectly, "Why the hell do you climb mountains?" I can't explain this. I love the physical exertion. I love the wind, the storms, and the fresh air. I love the companionship in the outdoors. I love the reality. I love the change. I love the oneness with nature. I'm hungry. I enjoy clear water. I enjoy being warm at night when it's cold outside. All those simple things are extremely enjoyable. I can't explain it [further].¹⁷

The freedom of wilderness mountaineering creates a peak experience for many big-mountain participants. The activity, and the natural environment in which it takes place, overshadow the importance of actually summiting a mountain.

To lay the groundwork for my research on participants' motives for engaging in Alaska's big-mountain culture, Chapter 2 reviews literature from various fields, grounding the project in relevant concepts and theory. The review addresses four bodies of literature: tourism, concepts of frontier and wilderness, and depictions of Alaska in literature from two distinct eras. The chapter concludes by introducing my research methods.

I studied clients and guides at two big-mountain guiding operations in Alaska. These operations are locally owned, and work with mountain tourist clientele from across the globe. I wondered whether participants thought of Alaska as a wilderness and frontier; and whether an interest in travel, group dynamics, risk perception, and nature appreciation motivated their participation. Finally, I wondered whether study participants thought of themselves as participants in a tourism industry, and whether they valued niche tourism differently than mass tourism. I analyze the client survey and guide

¹⁷ Tim O'Connell, "Paul Petzoldt: Man of the Mountains," in *Sourcebook of Experiential Education: Key Thinkers and Their Contributions*, eds T. Smith and C. Knapp (New York: Routledge, 2011), 237.

interviews in Chapters 3 and Chapter 4, respectively. Chapter 5 discusses big-mountain tourism within the Alaska context. My paper's conclusions appear in Chapter 6.

This project contributes to the fields of northern studies and environmental humanities. As my research shows, Alaska's cosmopolitan moment has already come, but only within the client side of big-mountain culture. In contrast to beliefs held by many who live here, and images produced by tourism and in Alaska's literature, big-mountain tourism clients do not see Alaska as a frontier, a conclusion of political and cultural significance. Similarly, my research challenges the view that mountaineering is elitist, little more than an egocentric, imperial, and chauvinist conquest for the privileged. Based on hours of interviews with mountain guides, almost one hundred client surveys, my experience with the bear, and Outdoor Studies demographics, I posit that mountaineering's cultural participants are eco-centric and ethically-charged people who believe that the animals who live in the wild environments where they are compelled to climb and ski are equal players in a more-than-human world.

Chapter 2 Adventure Tourism, Wilderness, Frontier, and Alaska

2.1 Big-Mountain Tourism

Alaska is a popular destination for big-mountain tourism. To better understand Alaska's big-mountain culture and the niche tourism it facilitates, this chapter reviews pertinent tourism literature, considering positive and negative effects the industry may have on society or the individual. This section of the literature review then introduces adventure tourism and concludes by developing big-mountain as a niche form. In sections that follow, concepts of wilderness and frontier, and depictions of Alaska in literature, connect Alaska's mystique with its draw for big-mountain tourism.

2.1.1 Modern Tourism

Modern tourism began in the industrializing Western world of the nineteenth century.¹ According to Merriam-Webster, the term means travel for pleasure, and also refers to the theory and practice of touring, or, the attraction, accommodation, or entertainment of tourists.² The industrial revolution, advances in transportation, nationalism and increased leisure time encouraged a formerly sedentary middle class to begin exploring and traveling for pleasure. As scholar Adrian Franklin noted: "Nationalism and the new universal culture it produced, particularly the new culture of citizenship, [allowed] citizens much broader horizons, interests and histories . . . To [tour] was more than just the gaining of experience, it was a performing of small ritual acts of

¹ Hal K. Rothman, *Devil's Bargains, Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 29.

² *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 2003), 1322.

national solidarity and citizenship [by] participating in a much larger and exciting world.”³

Advocates of tourism included Mark Twain, who epitomized the nineteenth century American tourist—one performing small acts of nationalism by participating, because of advances in international transportation and communication, in the larger and more accessible world. In his 1869 satiric travelogue, *The Innocents Abroad, or The New Pilgrim’s Progress*, Twain chronicled his travels with a group of Americans through Europe and the Holy Land via a chartered vessel, a mid-nineteenth century “Grand Tour” that paralleled the beginnings of modern tourism. Before his departure, a delighted Twain wrote: “I basked in the happiness of being for once in my life drifting with the tide of a great popular movement. Every body was going to Europe—I, too, was going to Europe.”⁴ Literary scholar Jeffrey Melton believed that: “Twain’s travel books and his tourist experiences indicate he was at the forefront both as a travel writer helping to popularize [tourism’s] seductive, engulfing power *and* as a tourist participating in one of its earliest leisure cruises.”⁵

After spending a month aboard the ship *Quaker City*, Twain seemed convinced of the benefits of tourism, noting that: “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things can not be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of earth all one’s lifetime.”⁶ These sentiments reflect a central assumption about the benefits of tourism—exposure to other cultures can promote cosmopolitanism, and

³ Adrian Franklin, “Tourism,” in *A Handbook of Leisure Studies*, eds. Chris Rojek, Susan M. Shaw, and A.J. Veal (New York: St. Martin’s, 2006), 395.

⁴ Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad, or the New Pilgrims’ Progress* (New York: Viking Press, 1984), 24.

⁵ Jeffrey Alan Melton, *Mark Twain, Travel Books, and Tourism: The Tide of A Great Popular Movement* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2002), 5.

⁶ Twain, 521.

cultural and racial tolerance.⁷ Since the mid-nineteenth century, tourism has played an important economic role in global affairs, growing exponentially over time. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), a division of the United Nations: “International tourist arrivals have increased from 25 million globally in 1950 to 278 million in 1980, 674 million in 2000, and 1186 million in 2015.”⁸ The UNWTO, like Twain, believes that tourism is positive for society, and attribute its growth to globalization, whereby advances in telecommunication infrastructure and transportation have contributed to the interdependence of cultural worldviews and economic activities.⁹

A large body of scholarship contends that tourism is negative. Edward Said emphasized the negative effects of foreign cultures on visited places, noting the history of European culture, with its presumptions of superiority, imposing itself on Asia and the Far East through its imperial and colonial ambitions. Europeans grouped “Orientals” into an “Other” category, one that implied European cultural sophistication and righteousness and encouraged European empire building. As Said noted: “Orientalism is never far from the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying “us” Europeans as against all “those” non-Europeans; . . . the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures.”¹⁰

Historian Daniel Boorstin introduced similar concerns in 1964, reasoning that tourists brought a dehumanizing sense of entitlement to visited cultures. In *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, Boorstin argued that tourism weakened the character of tourist destinations, and limited a traveler’s ability to determine reality from

⁷ Franklin, 398-99.

⁸ United Nations World Tourism Organization, “UNWTO Tourism Highlights,” 2016 Edition, 2, doi:10.18111/9789284418145, accessed January 15, 2017, <http://www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284418145>.

⁹ Martin Wolf, “Shaping Globalization,” *Finance and Development* 51, no. 3 (2014), 22.

¹⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 15.

constructed image. Tourism changed the character of visited places in order to meet the needs of tourists, in the process remaking destinations by changing the lifestyle and general lived experience of locals. Post-tourism economies became dependent on visitors rather than the exchange of more traditional goods and services.¹¹

Boorstin also contended that tourism was negative for the human psyche. Participants in pre-tourism travel were problem solvers, a trait that required critical thinking and decision-making. But tourism, the modern version of travel, one whose participants followed a guide or guidebook and often traveled in large groups, was passive, and harmful to the spirit. As Boorstin explained:

The old English noun ‘travel’ (in the sense of a journey) was originally the same word as ‘travail’ (meaning ‘trouble,’ ‘work,’ or ‘torment’). To journey—to ‘travail,’ or (later) to travel—then was to do something laborious or troublesome. The traveler was an active man at work; he went strenuously in search of people, of adventure, of experience. The tourist is passive; he expects interesting things to happen to him. He goes ‘sight-seeing’ . . . Thus foreign travel ceased to be an activity—an experience, an undertaking—and instead became a commodity.¹²

Tourism literature came to adopt Boorstin’s traveler/tourist separation as a distinction between “authentic” forms of travel, and more banal tourism.

Sociologist Dean MacCannell, in his 1976 study *The Tourist*, subtly disagreed with Boorstin, arguing that the growth in tourism was “a quest for authentic experiences, perceptions, and insights,” a product of the sudden abundance of leisure time for the

¹¹ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to the Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 107.

¹² Boorstin, 85.

modern middle class.¹³ The tourist represented “modern man,” whose leisure time allowed for more opportunities, through travel and media exposure, to other cultures than in the past. Tourism was an authenticity quest, a response to alienation in modern life.¹⁴ Yet because tourists often only see visited places at a surficial level, the authentic cultural experience they seek is at best superficial.¹⁵ This becomes doubly alienating, as the tourist feels him or herself an outsider in the visited culture, unable to interact in a meaningful or authentic way, while also feeling alienated from the modern life at home from which he/she escaped.¹⁶

In recent years, tourism scholarship has moved away from considerations of its potential negative effects and has realigned with Mark Twain’s cosmopolitanist sentiments from one hundred plus years earlier. “Instead of seeing places as relatively fixed entities,” suggested Simon Coleman and Mike Crang, “to be juxtaposed in analytic terms with more dynamic flows of tourists, images and cultures, we need to see them as fluid,” part of a globalized stream that relates to human curiosity.¹⁷ Similarly, Adrian Franklin concluded, much as Twain did, “that we should promote tourism more in the name of global peace and understanding, [than] in the name of physical renewal and self-making.”¹⁸

¹³ Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 105.

¹⁴ Numerous theorists have considered the alienating effects of modern life. Melvin Seeman, “On the Meaning of Alienation,” *American Sociological Review* 24, no. 6 (1959).

¹⁵ MacCannell, 155.

¹⁶ Ibid, 160.

¹⁷ Simon Coleman & Mike Crang, “Grounded Tourists, Travelling Theory,” in *Tourism: Between Place and Performance*, eds. S. Coleman and M. Crang (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002), 1.

¹⁸ Franklin, 401.

2.1.2 Niche Big-Mountain Tourism in Alaska

In the globalized flow of the twenty-first century, various types of tourism have developed, including heritage, adventure, and niche big-mountain. Alaska's stunning landscape of mountains and coastline draw two million visitors a year. Annually worth more than two billion dollars to the state of Alaska, tourism accounts for 9 percent of statewide employment.¹⁹ Depictions of the place as a wilderness and a frontier, in literature, television, and film, create a heritage tourism industry. "Increasingly," observed Adrian Franklin, "parts of the natural world have become managed as places of visitation. Visits to nature have become transformed into pilgrimages to spiritually uplifting and sacred sites, and visitation itself has become a conservation problem."²⁰ Alaska's wild places are promoted by tourism as an American national heritage, a strategy that capitalizes on the state's history of environmental conservation.

The tourism industry promotes Alaska's exceptional geography as the state has more than 50 percent of the United States' coastline and the continent's highest mountains and the wildness of the place captures visitor interest.²¹ As sociologist John Urry observed:

The tourist gaze is directed to features of landscape which separate them off from everyday experience. Such aspects are viewed because they are taken to be out of the ordinary . . . Places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is anticipation,

¹⁹Alaska Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development, Division of Economic Development. 2013. "Economic Impact of Alaska's Visitor Industry 2014-15 Update" (prepared by McDowell Group), April 2016, 5-6, accessed December 14, 2016, <https://www.commerce.alaska.gov/web/Portals/6/pub/TourismResearch/AVSP/Visitor%20Impacts%202016%20update%204%2015%2016.pdf>.

²⁰ Franklin, 386.

²¹ Alaska has 6,640 miles of coastline, and is home to three of the North America's ten highest mountains, Denali, Mt St. Elias, and Mt. Foraker. "Shoreline Mileage of the United States," last modified March 17, 2017, <https://coast.noaa.gov/data/docs/states/shorelines.pdf>.

especially through daydreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasures, either on a different scale or involving different senses from those customarily encountered.²² Since “most of the population in the developed world lives in urban areas,” reasoned tourism scholars Paul Beedie and Simon Hudson:

Mountains, lakes, oceans, jungle, desert islands, and other wild places represent escape locations that offer excitement, stimulation, and potential adventure. This dislocation of self from the ordinary to extraordinary appears to provide a pleasurable experience that is central to tourism.²³

And in Alaska, where distances are vast, the tourism industry makes visitation to many of Alaska’s remote wild places realistic by developing access that would otherwise be prohibitively expensive.

Adventure tourism represents a significant portion of all tourism in Alaska. Day operators cater to one million cruise ship tourists annually, offering excursions including glacier treks, whitewater rafting, and zip lining. This type of tourism “creates a cushioning zone between . . . everyday life and the extraordinary experience of adventure and holiday,” explained Beedie and Hudson.²⁴ By deferring risk management to guides, adventure tourists garner an opportunity for a peak experience, “achieving personal satisfaction through a successful negotiation of a challenge that demands balancing risk and competence,” without any real commitment to learning the skills of the activity.²⁵ One significant difference between adventure and other forms of tourism is that the

²² John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage Publications, 1990), 3.

²³ Paul Beedie and Simon Hudson, “The Emergence of Mountain-Based Adventure Tourism,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 30, no. 3 (2003), 625.

²⁴ Beedie and Hudson, 627.

²⁵ Ibid, 631.

activities require a “practical engagement. Physical effort is involved, which from some perspectives is closer to work than holiday.”²⁶

I interact with adventure tourists as a professional mountain guide, in Alaska and internationally, and I train prospective outdoor professionals in skills and theory. Alaska big-mountain tourism is a niche category that has not been studied. It falls under the broad umbrella of adventure tourism, but contrasts with the mass consumption availability of other forms in several ways. Alaska big-mountain tourism is limited to entry, because participants must be financially able to participate, and they must be physiologically and psychologically fit enough for the strenuous nature of the physical activity. This type of tourism involves the management of and participation in high consequence mountaineering situations that occasionally include a significant amount of risk, for both the guide and the tourist-client. At the same time, participants are part of a global mountain climbing culture, one that values self-reliance, and associates notions of frontier and wilderness with Alaskan mountaineering.

I began this section with an overview of the broad notion of tourism as it has been discussed in the academic literature, then argued that the specific conditions of big-mountain culture and tourism make it a niche form of Alaska tourism. The paper now moves to notions of wilderness and frontier, where I connect these concepts to the larger American wilderness and environmental movements. The literature review concludes with an appraisal of two major periods in Alaska literature. My aim in the next two sections is to capture Alaska’s mystique, as captured in the literature, an atmosphere and culture that big-mountain tourists and guides find attractive and associate with mountaineering in Alaska.

²⁶ Ibid, 631.

2.2 Wilderness and Frontier

This section examines wilderness concepts and frontier theory, literature that helps explain Alaska's attractiveness as a big-mountain tourism destination. The term wilderness suggests ecosystems existing in a state without human modification. Institutionalized in the United States by the 1964 Wilderness Act,²⁷ the term took on a legal meaning, which represented a significant achievement for wilderness advocates, and more generally for conservation.²⁸ The Wilderness Act reads as follows:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable; (2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; (3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and (4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.²⁹

Passage of the act allowed Americans to preserve public lands in perpetuity, expressly limiting human activities to non-motorized forms of recreation, and prohibiting

²⁷ The bill underwent nine years of debate, sixty-five drafts, and eighteen public hearings.

²⁸ Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University, 2001), 226.

²⁹ *Wilderness Act of 1964*, Public Law 88-577, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 78 (1964): 891.

activities such as logging and mining, the development of roads, use of motor vehicles, or construction of permanent structures. The Wilderness Act created the National Wilderness Preservation System, and immediately designated 9.1 million acres in 54 areas across the United States.³⁰

The etymology of the term wilderness, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, dates to the thirteenth century, and finds its roots in the Old English *wilddeoren*, meaning wild beasts, or Middle English adaptation of the word to *wildern*. Primary connotations of wilderness from the dictionary include:

A tract or region uncultivated and uninhabited by human beings, an area essentially undisturbed by human activity together with its naturally developed life community, an empty or pathless area or region, a part of a garden devoted to wild growth; or, obsolete, in a wild or uncultivated state; or a confusing multitude or mass, an indefinitely great number or quantity, a bewildering situation.³¹

These definitions listed in order of prominence and taken from a 2014 reference text, reflect an evolving historical perspective on the meaning of wilderness.

Environmental historian Roderick Nash argues that wilderness, as a concept in American consciousness, has evolved several times. The practical realities of frontier America were compounded by environmental challenges posed by wilderness, often creating uncomfortable living conditions. The geographic character of seventeenth century North America, with diverse Native American populations and apparently undeveloped land, presented unfamiliar conditions to European immigrants, many of whom belonged to religious groups escaping persecution or to government-supported

³⁰ “Wilderness Statistics Reports,” last modified December 8, 2006, <http://www.wilderness.net/NWPS/>.

³¹ *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 2003), 1432.

colonial expeditions. Euro-Americans' early notions of wilderness were often informed by Christian thinking that conceived of everything outside of Eden as wild nature. Early connotations for the word "wild" were the unknown or bewildering qualities outside of human control. For the non-secularists, wilderness was everything outside the garden; secular colonials, tasked with colonial development, and utilitarian by nature, found wilderness conditions dangerous and inconvenient.³²

The industrialization of Europe and the eastern United States in the nineteenth century led to rapid development and the disappearance of wild landscapes, which initiated a value shift in Americans' appreciation of wilderness. Undeveloped nature became the core of Ralph Waldo Emerson's religious philosophy. In Emerson's seminal 1836 lecture *Nature*, the former Unitarian minister argued that because the natural world existed outside of human control, it held spiritual truths and healing properties. Emerson wrote:

To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. . . . The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other. . . .

Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.³³

Emerson's nature philosophy inspired a generation of American intellectuals, most famously Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau believed naturalness and wild, undeveloped areas offered opportunities for solitude and respite from a rapidly

³² Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University, 2001), 14.

³³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Major Prose*, eds. Joel Myerson and Ronald Bosco (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 36-37.

industrializing world. Writing from Walden pond, on land owned by Emerson, and from a cabin of his own construction, Thoreau related: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach ... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.”³⁴

The nature philosophy of Emerson and Thoreau has been termed transcendentalism, an American movement of the nineteenth century, one that built on the intellectual history and evolution of human thought stimulated by the Enlightenment. Nash described the core belief of Transcendentalism as “the existence of a correspondence or parallelism between the higher realm of spiritual truth and the lower one of material objects. For this reason natural objects assumed importance because, if rightly seen, they reflected spiritual truths.”³⁵ Transcendentalism had a non-secular overtone. It placed God or a higher power in nature, and for Thoreau, in wildness. Where the initial American wilderness concept subjugated undeveloped space as negative, the transcendentalist concept elevated undeveloped space as positive.

The thoughts and practices of transcendentalism arose in the developed, urban American east coast. Both Emerson and Thoreau lived in and around Boston. Emerson traveled frequently on speaking tours, which exposed him to non-urban spaces, while Thoreau, an avid walker, experienced wildness while occupying Emerson’s property on the pastoral and suburban Walden Lake. Across the continent, and a generation later, John Muir, a Calvinist, found inspiration in the natural world by actively participating in wild nature. A founder of the conservation movement in the United States, John Muir

³⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden: A Fully Annotated Edition*, ed. Jeffrey S Cramer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 88.

³⁵ Nash, 85.

politicized the wilderness concept, and set the stage for the creation of Yosemite National Park.

Muir, who relocated from Scotland at an early age, was repulsed by the unrestrained development of the nineteenth century. After almost losing his vision while working as a machinist, Muir took to wandering the Western landscape, finding beauty and spiritual purpose in sweeping areas of natural grandeur, eventually settling in California's high Sierra Nevada. Muir wrote prodigiously while living in the Sierras, often employing transcendentalist style language to express his wonder at the natural world. "I like to walk, touch living Mother Earth—bare feet best, and thrill every step. I used to envy happy reptiles that had the advantage of so much body in contact with earth, bosom to bosom. We live with our heels as well as head and most of our pleasure comes in that way."³⁶

John Muir's publication of his Sierra wanderings in the mid to late nineteenth century initiated conservation politics in the United States. Muir set out to check the unrestrained development that threatened to destroy all of America's natural, wild landscapes. The first high profile individual in a wave of wilderness advocates, Muir wrote about the aesthetic and scientific importance of Yosemite, popularizing the place as a repository of wilderness. When Muir arrived in Yosemite in 1868, it was already designated as a protected area. Prominent San Francisco based citizens had lobbied for federal protection of Yosemite in the 1850s, based on their concerns about degradation of the area from commercialization and tourism. The Yosemite Grant, signed by President Abraham Lincoln in June of 1864, was the first instance of parkland set aside for

³⁶ John Muir, *To Yosemite and Beyond: Writings from the Years 1863-1875*, eds. Robert Engberg and Donald Wesling (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1999), 73.

collective ownership and preservation. The Yosemite Grant was later used as a precedent for the creation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872, the world's first national park.³⁷

Muir, discouraged by logging and overgrazing in the Sierras, advocated increased protection for Yosemite. His efforts and collaboration with journalists and policy makers yielded legal status, and in October of 1890 Yosemite became the third national park in the United States, created only one day after the Giant Sequoia National Park.³⁸ In defense of Yosemite, Muir wrote: "Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life."³⁹ Based on the success and continued concern for protection of natural wild environments, Muir founded the Sierra Club in 1892, still one of the most influential environmental organizations in the United States.⁴⁰

Muir was an amateur scientist. His naturalist interests were partially inspired by United States diplomat George Perkins Marsh, a contemporary of Thoreau. Marsh was credited with establishing the tenets of conservation in his interdisciplinary 1864 study, *Man and Nature*. He wrote: "The ravages committed by man subvert the relations and destroy the balance which nature had established between her organized and her inorganic creations. . . . The operation of causes set in action by man has brought the face of the earth to a desolation almost as complete as that of the moon."⁴¹ *Man and Nature* offered examples of exploited agricultural landscapes Marsh had observed during

³⁷ Douglas Brinkley, *The Quiet World* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 6.

³⁸ Donald Worster, *A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 320.

³⁹ John Muir, *Our National Parks* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1981), 1.

⁴⁰ Worster, 329.

⁴¹ George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2000), 43-44.

diplomatic assignments in Europe, where uninformed land use had led to decreased soil productivity, species extinction, and diminished quality of life.

The politically charged conservation-based wilderness period when John Muir was so influential applied environmental science to protect natural landscapes, based on the understanding that such action was important for human health, and for sustainable land use. This third wilderness period, ranging from the creation of the initial national parks in the United States, and culminating with the signing of the 1964 Wilderness Act, institutionalized the importance of wilderness preservation in the United States.

Wilderness, as defined by federal law in 1964, coincided with the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, a text credited with inspiring the environmental movement. Carson, an ecologist and nature writer, was troubled by the lack of awareness about the dangers of pesticide use. Like Muir, she used the power of language to share her environment concerns with a national audience, warning that harmful chemicals like DDT were polluting the planet and endangering human health. Carson wrote:

We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have been travelling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road—the one less traveled by—offers out last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth.⁴²

Passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act established conservation as the basis of federal management of lands. "Wilderness advocates," observed historian James Morton

⁴² Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, 1962), 277.

Turner, “played a crucial role in changing the ways Americans understand, value, and debate the future of the nation’s public lands.”⁴³ Passage of the Wilderness Act prepared the United States for the Environmental Policy Act of 1969, a major success for the environmental movement that Carson inspired, which required environmental impact statements for any development of public lands. The Wilderness Act also allowed for the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) of 1980, protecting 56.6 million acres of Alaska as wilderness.

Wilderness is a composite resource, one that captures legal, physical, and metaphysical qualities. As described by the 1964 Act, wilderness is a physical place, large, roadless, and uninhabited, left in its natural condition and open to the public for outdoor recreation and opportunities for solitude. It offers critical habitat for wildlife, including endangered species, and can offer a natural baseline for human impacts on the natural world. Wilderness also offers metaphysical qualities, and many appreciate it aesthetically, for its self-willed character, natural perfection, and sacred qualities.

Scholar Linda Graber considered wilderness a sacred space, one with transcendental qualities that fostered wilderness purists, individuals who revered wild nature and found self-actualization in it. Developing concepts first set forth by the geographer John Kirtland Wright, who in the mid-twentieth century coined the term geopiety, a belief in and worship of nature as holy,⁴⁴ Graber described wilderness as an ideal landscape, one where the participant had an integral and righteous sense of place.⁴⁵

⁴³ James Morton Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness: American Environmental Politics since 1964* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 13.

⁴⁴ John Kirtland Wright, “Notes on Early American Geopiety” in *Human Nature in Geography: Fourteen papers, 1925–1965*, ed. John Kirtland Wright (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 251.

⁴⁵ Graber, 40–41.

Wilderness offers opportunities for solitude, a metaphysical theme in the language of transcendentalism, of the 1964 Act, and of Graber's sacred space. Recently, social scientists have argued that the psychological benefits of solitude have not been effectively measured or appreciated. As Steven Hollenhorst noted, the benefits of "solitude are [a] psychological detachment from society for the purpose of cultivating the inner world of the self. [Wilderness offers space] for self-discovery, self-realization, meaning, wholeness, and heightened awareness of one's deepest feelings, and impulses. It implies a morality that values the self, at least on occasion, as above the common good."⁴⁶

Some scholars, such as historian William Cronin, believe that our understanding of wilderness leads us to ignore significant environmental concerns. A modern preservationist, Cronin argued that wilderness segregates land into types, creating some worth protecting, while other, less desirable parts are often ignored, to the detriment of the health of the natural world. Cronin, insisting there must a middle ground, reasoned that wilderness, and more broadly environmentalism, must foster responsible behavior on all types of public lands.⁴⁷

Contemporary legal wilderness designation, informed by transcendentalist and conservationist values, remains politically contentious. In the 53 years since the passage of the Wilderness Act, protected wilderness acreage has grown to 109.5 million acres

⁴⁶ Steven Hollenhorst and Chris Jones, "Wilderness Solitude: Beyond the Social-Spatial Perspective" (*United States Forest Service*, RMRS-P-20, 2001), 56, accessed November 14, 2011, http://www.wilderness.net/library/documents/Udens00_Hollen_Jones.pdf.

⁴⁷ William Cronin, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground, Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 80.

across 750 areas. Fifty-two percent of all wilderness in the country, including 56.6 million acres, lies in Alaska.⁴⁸

Alaska's vast expanse of wilderness, along with its association in the American imagination as an extension of the country's western frontier, contribute to the region's attractiveness as a destination for mountain tourists. A term of French derivation, a frontier is a transition zone, a geographic area at the edge of a developed region.⁴⁹ In 1893 historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932) published "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in which he argued that the existence of a western frontier critically influenced American identity in the nineteenth century. "American development has exhibited not merely an advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area."⁵⁰ The presence of a frontier, the "meeting point between savagery and civilization," promised the prospect of land ownership and continuous opportunities for renewal and reinvention for those individuals with the courage to make the trek westward, Turner wrote.⁵¹

The tension between "savagery and civilization" at the frontier of the nineteenth century American West required hardiness. "The frontier [was] the line of most rapid and effective Americanization." The region required that inhabitants have a:

coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and acquisitiveness; that practical inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things . . . that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism . . .

⁴⁸ "Wilderness Statistics Reports," last modified December 8, 2006, <http://www.wilderness.net/NWPS/>.

⁴⁹ *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 2003), 503.

⁵⁰ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921), 2-3.

⁵¹ Turner, 3-4.

and withal that buoyancy and exuberance that comes with freedom—these are the traits of the frontier.⁵²

Moreover, the existence of this frontier continually infused American democracy itself with that same energy born of freedom; thus the frontier, Turner argued, explained the vibrancy and strength of America's national character.

The closing of the frontier in the 1890s, after America had been settled from coast to coast, marked a significant turning point for Turner, who believed the zone and its notions of unlimited opportunity had created a sense of optimism in the American people. "Each frontier," he wrote, "did indeed furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past; and freshness, and confidence, and scorn of older society, impatience of its restraints and its ideas, and indifference to its lessons."⁵³

While Turner's frontier thesis resonated deeply with Americans, his use of the notion of the frontier as moral justification for nation building conveniently disregarded the exploitative aspects of its appropriation. The trapping of furs, ranching, logging, and mining, resource uses that accompanied frontier development, ravaged ecosystems. Turner's celebratory narrative of America's westward expansion also disregarded the aboriginal rights of Native Americans whose homeland these recent settlers now occupied, and whose lives and culture they had trampled upon. Nevertheless, as following discussion illustrates, the notion of the frontier in American history has continued to inform American identity, and has extended to Alaska.

Following the publication of his thesis, Turner, and a generation of historians he influenced, tried, unsuccessfully, to find a narrative that captured the American story

⁵² Ibid, 3-4, 37.

⁵³ Ibid, 38.

post-frontier. By the mid-twentieth century, new western historians loudly critiqued Turner's thesis. The resilience of the frontier thesis, argued Cronin, rested in its convenient narrative. Turner "showed that one could write the history of the United States according to the order in which different regions of the country had been occupied by Anglo-American settlers. One could thus organize American history along geographic lines that were also temporal: the frontier thesis, in effect, set American space in motion and gave it a plot."⁵⁴ The influential new western historian Patricia Limerick observed that acknowledging the popularity of the frontier concept was as much a factual account of American history as the events Turner originally tried to reconcile.⁵⁵ Even though Turner's plot was fictitious, the frontier remained the "central and most persistent story" of the nineteenth century United States, according to Cronin.⁵⁶

With the settlement of the West, the frontier concept extended to Alaska, a final, seemingly inexhaustible American frontier, one with incomprehensible resource wealth and exceptional scenery. The frontier concept in Alaska has been expressed as three distinct notions: resource bonanza, environmental Eden, and a more elusive prospect of escape and renewal.

Like the Klondike Gold Rush, where, as historian Pierre Berton put it: "[of the] one hundred thousand persons [who] set out on the trail to the [Klondike] . . . [only] a few hundred found [enough] gold to call themselves rich," only infrequently has the resource bonanza myth of Alaska's frontier benefited the individual.⁵⁷ Since Alaska's purchase from Russia for \$7.2 million in 1867, \$670 billion of resource wealth has been

⁵⁴ William Cronin, "Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner," *Western Historical Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1987), 166.

⁵⁵ Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Turnerians All: The Dream of a Helpful History in an Intelligible World," *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (1995), 714.

⁵⁶ Cronin, 176.

⁵⁷ Pierre Berton, *Klondike: The Last Great Gold Rush, 1896-1899* (Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2001), 417.

extracted from the region, mostly by corporations.⁵⁸ This economic activity includes the Pribilof fur seal trade; the salmon and timber industries; gold, copper, and other mineral production; and most lucratively, the production of petroleum.⁵⁹

Alaska's abundance of resource wealth, combined with the prospect of "bonanza economics," the acquisition of natural resources without equal inputs of labor and investment, motivated generations of Americans, and Russians before them, to travel to 'the last frontier' to strike it rich.⁶⁰ Alaska residents' frustrations with the lack of opportunity for private ownership, with absentee capitalists owning the lion's share of canneries and mines, and with federal management of fisheries and timber, motivated them to fight for self-governance in the first half of the twentieth century. Their efforts eventually met with success, and Alaska became the forty-ninth state in 1959.⁶¹

At the time of Alaska's purchase in 1867, Japanese and Russian sealers had been harvesting Bering Sea seals regardless of sex and beyond sustainable levels. As the new owner of a lucrative industry, the United States leased the seal harvest to private business without any consideration of seal conservation.⁶² The distinguished American naturalist William Dall had a different vision for the district: "Alaska [had] ecological, moral, scientific, and spiritual values that would help preserve the frontier spirit if properly managed by the federal government." Jennifer Brice and James Mason note that Dall's ideal Alaska drew from the cultural values of the American "frontier spirit," its "degree of purposefulness, of self-reflection, [arising] from the choice to live outside the margins

⁵⁸ Institute of Social and Economic Research, "Alaska's People and Economy, 1867-2009," UA Research Summary No. 15, University of Alaska Anchorage, 15, (2009), 1, accessed December 14, 2016, http://www.iser.uaa.alaska.edu/Publications/formal/rsummary/UA_RS15final_eversion.pdf.

⁵⁹ ISER, 2.

⁶⁰ Richard Slotnick, *The Fatal Environment* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 34.

⁶¹ Terrence Cole, *Fighting For the Forty-Ninth Star: C. W. Snedden and the Crusade for Alaska Statehood* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2010), 41.

⁶² Claus-M. Naske and Herman Slotnick, *Alaska: A History of the Forty-Ninth State*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 68-69. See Alaska Commercial Company.

of civilization,” and extended them to resource management in Alaska.⁶³ A contemporary of John Muir, Dall believed that society might re-value nature away from extraction toward conservation and imagined that Alaska’s seal herd might one day attract tourists from around the world.⁶⁴

More than ninety years after William Dall’s call for the conservation of Alaska’s environment, Congress protected Alaska’s federal lands with the 1964 Wilderness Act and 1970 Environmental Protection Act, major victories for the environmental movement. As scholar Susan Kollin noted, for those efforts to succeed, Alaska first had to be reimagined as a new Eden, an environmental frontier of exceptional natural beauty, “valued, appreciated, and marketed to potential consumers.”⁶⁵ She observed: “Alaska functioned as a national salvation whose existence alleviated fears about the inevitable environmental doom the United States seemed to face and, like previous American frontiers, promised to provide the nation with opportunities for renewal.” That Alaska was socially constructed as being in a “state of nature” by the environmental movement, a natural frontier and extension of the nineteenth century landscapes of the American West, “marks a yearning [by the American people] for undeveloped lands in a world whose surfaces are perceived to be fully mapped.”⁶⁶

Psychologist Judith Kleinfeld, on the other hand, depicted Alaska as a spiritual frontier, one that offered residents the freedom to reinvent themselves or self-actualize; much in the way Frederick Jackson Turner portrayed the frontier of the American West. “Alaska,” relayed Kleinfeld, “offers vivid, contemporary illustrations of America’s

⁶³ Jennifer Brice and James Mason, *The Last Settlers* (Pittsburgh: Duquense University Press, 1998), 2.

⁶⁴ Brinkley, 34.

⁶⁵ Susan Kollin, *Nature’s State: Imagining Alaska as the Last Frontier* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 17.

⁶⁶ Kollin, 5.

shared story, the frontier romance.”⁶⁷ Concurring with the notion of the continued resonance of the Alaskan frontier among Americans, scholar Eric Heyne noted that: “[The] trope of the ‘last frontier,’ evokes nostalgia, . . . promote[s] images of the nineteenth century, . . . [and] remains the dominant image of the North in the American imagination.”⁶⁸ Historian Gerald Nash placed this frontier romance in the “West of the imagination, . . . an uncomplicated, sparsely populated area characterized by noble and distinctive individuals, . . . [rich in] symbols, such as the log cabin, [and] fraught with emotion and shared cultural values.”⁶⁹ That this Western imaginary persists and inspires twenty-first century scholarship testifies to the relevance of Turner’s frontier thesis in America’s collective identity.

A master narrative, the frontier romance created, in Kleinfeld’s words: “what mythologists call a cosmos, a map that orders both the physical and moral world. . . . What beckons the cultural inhabitants of the frontier cosmos is the journey of exploration and enterprise, the journey to uncharted regions.”⁷⁰ The living Alaskans Kleinfeld studied, who were playing out their versions of the frontier romance, contributed to a meta-story of American culture. She found that people “who go to Alaska to live frontier lives are seeking and bearing witness to the freedom America offers.” These individuals perceived Alaska as the last frontier, thus affirming the enduring relevance of Turner’s Western imaginary.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Judith Kleinfeld, *The Frontier Romance: Environment, Culture, and Alaska Identity* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2012), vi.

⁶⁸ Eric Heyne, “From ‘the Last Frontier’ to *The Island Within*: Two Versions of Alaska in Contemporary Nonfiction Narrative,” *The Northern Review* 21 (2000), 38.

⁶⁹ Gerald D. Nash, *Creating the West: Historical Interpretations, 1890-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), 208.

⁷⁰ Kleinfeld, ix-x.

⁷¹ Ibid, 79.

Yet the frontier romance misrepresents the availability of land for private ownership in Alaska. A central motivation for travel to the Western frontier was a promise of land to homestead and in time, own. Prior to statehood, the national government owned 99 percent of Alaska. Early settlers evaded legalities by building cabins on public lands wherever convenient, but this process rarely led to clear title. In the twenty-first century, almost 60 percent of Alaska's 365 million acres is federally owned. Individuals or families own less than 1 percent of Alaska's land privately.⁷²

All three of these frontier concepts within Alaska: the bonanza, new Eden, and the frontier romance, disregard Alaska Natives' perceptions of the homeland they have inhabited for millennia. "Many Americans think of Alaska as an unpeopled, untouched wilderness," asserted Sydney Huntington, a Koyukon Athabascan. "Indian, Eskimo, and Aleut people lived in these 'wilderness' lands for centuries before the first whites arrived. . . . The first inhabitants of the region established intelligent relationships with Alaska's wild lands before the dawn of written history."⁷³ American frontier and wilderness concepts continue to contest the place of Alaska Native peoples on the region's shared land.

Popular depictions of Alaska, including wilderness and frontier concepts, inform Americans' and others' perceptions of the region. The frontier notions of resource bonanza, untouched nature, and spiritual renewal, dominate American impressions of the state. The following sections will review selections of Alaskan literature, considering wilderness and frontier themes as motivations for big-mountain tourists to visit Alaska.

⁷² Alaska Department of Natural Resources, "Land Ownership in Alaska," last modified March 2000, http://dnr.alaska.gov/mlw/factsht/land_fs/land_own.pdf. The state of Alaska and Alaska Native Corporations hold significant percentages of Alaska's lands.

⁷³ Sydney Huntington and James Rearden, *Shadows on the Koyukuk* (Portland: Alaska Northwest Books, 1993), 211.

2.3 Depictions of Alaska in Literature

Literature about Alaska reflects a complex array of historical and current public perceptions of the region. Common themes found in the literature include its frontier and wilderness conditions, qualities of exceptionality, and its peripheral location, which contribute both to feelings of independence among its residents and alienation from core political and economic centers on America's east coast.

To explore how popular depictions of the region motivate participation in the Alaska's big-mountain tourism industry, this section reviews popular literature, beginning in pre-territorial Alaska and concluding with the era following resolution of land claims in the late twentieth century. Section 1 of this part of the literature review will address literary works that reflect perceptions of an exceptional Alaska and a wilderness frontier, with analysis of Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* (1903), John Muir's *Travels in Alaska* (1915), and Robert Marshall's *Arctic Village* (1933). Section 2 focuses on themes of transition, identifying changing landscapes and lifestyles of modern Alaska, with analysis of John Haines' *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire* (1989), Sidney Huntington's *Shadows on the Koyukuk* (1993), and John McPhee's *Coming into the Country* (1976).

2.3.1 Exceptional Alaska, Wilderness Frontier

The three texts examined in this section are late nineteenth or early twentieth century accounts of experiences in Alaska and the far north. Jack London's *Call of the Wild* and John Muir's *Travels in Alaska* shared wide readership in the United States. Their popularity shaped American ideas about Alaska as a wilderness and frontier. A

generation later, Bob Marshall's *Arctic Village* fed popular support for the environmental movement, which eventually led to the 1964 Wilderness Act. These texts depict lifestyles of the early twentieth century in Alaska and meet the conditions that Judith Kleinfeld termed frontier romance, "display[ing] and celebrat[ing] what Americans consider to be their national virtues—an instinctive love of freedom, individualism, and self reliance."⁷⁴ Each book expresses respect for the northern landscape, either as a wild antagonist or a sacred space, or both. Describing the far north as both wilderness margin and bonanza destination, these texts convey a northern experience that is an extension of America's Western frontier.

The popularity of *The Call of the Wild* was due in part to its publication in 1903, only a few years after the Klondike Gold Rush, which captured Americans' imagination. As the United States remained in the economic depression that began in 1893, the rumored wealth of the Bonanza Creek strike of 1896 triggered a massive rush. Some 100,000 people tried to reach Dawson City and the Klondike in 1897 and 1898. Of these, only 30,000 'Argonauts,' as historian Pierre Berton affectionately termed them, reached Dawson, and only 4,000 lucky individuals found gold. London was among the stampedeers, and spent a year in the Klondike in his late teens. One of the richest fields in the world, the Klondike produced more than twenty million ounces of gold.⁷⁵

In *Jack London and the Klondike* Franklin Walker chronicled how London's year in the far north created the substance for his subsequent professional writing career. "The Klondike rush was, in fact, as insane a gamble for fortune, as perverse a movement toward the wilderness to escape the crowded world, as the world had known to date."

⁷⁴ Kleinfeld, viii.

⁷⁵ Pierre Berton, *Klondike: The Last Great Gold Rush, 1896-1899* (Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2001), 269, 421-423, 430-431.

London recorded his motivations for participating in the Klondike, writing in his journal: “In one of its cyclopean moments the race had arisen and shoved back its frontier several thousand miles. Thus, with unconscious foresight, did mature society make room for its adolescent members. . . . [The] several hundred thousand miles of frigidity at least gave breathing space to those who would have suffocated at home.”⁷⁶

London used his year in the Klondike as inspiration for *The Call of the Wild*, a piece of fiction about a dog’s transformation from domestic pet to wild creature, during an unplanned adventure to the northern gold fields. The text suggested that the far north, where a culture existed “who knew no law except the law of club and fang,” offered early twentieth century society an opportunity to travel to a place where strength and cunning were basic requirements for survival. Stolen for use as a pack animal on the Chilkoot Trail, the dog Buck was “jerked from the heart of civilization and flung into the heart of all things primordial. . . . All was confusion and action, and every moment life and limb were in peril. . . . For these dogs and men were not town dogs and men. They were savages, all of them.” A wild alternative to the civilized south, London’s far north was a place with a morality suited to the circumstances. To survive, Buck had to resort to thievery, a choice that proved him “fit to [endure] the hostile Northland environment. It marked his adaptability, his capacity to adjust himself to changing conditions, the lack of which would have meant swift and terrible death. It marked, further, the decay or going to pieces of his moral nature, a vain thing and a handicap in the ruthless struggle for existence.”⁷⁷

In describing Buck, whose transformation from domestic to wild animal

⁷⁶ Franklin Walker, *Jack London and the Klondike* (San Marino: Huntington Library Press, 2005), 14.

⁷⁷ Jack London, “The Call of the Wild,” in *The Unabridged Jack London*, eds. Lawrence Teacher and Richard Nichols (Philadelphia: Running Press, 1981), 770, 775.

represented a central textual tension, London wrote: “His development (or retrogression) was rapid... The domesticated generations fell from him.” A central part of Buck’s transformation was from follower to leader, a transition brought about by the challenging conditions on the trail to the Klondike. “The dominant primordial beast was strong in Buck,” London wrote, “and under the fierce conditions of the trail it grew and grew.” In a primal challenge that required he become “preeminently cunning, and bide his time with a patience that was nothing less than primitive,” Buck fought and killed the dog team leader, Spitz. Altered by the wild and uncivilized rules of “the hostile Northland,” Buck transformed to a “primordial beast” in a rite of passage, allowing the dog to hear the call of the wild, a “sounding [from] the deeps of his nature, and of the parts of his nature that were deeper than he, going back into the womb of time.” Transformation complete, Buck, now a wild animal, “was older than the days he had seen and the breaths he had drawn. He linked the past with the present, and the eternity behind him in a mighty rhythm to which he swayed as the tides and seasons swayed.”⁷⁸ This imagery marked Buck’s final metamorphosis, leaving the reader imagining the far north as a landscape of eternal adventure.

The final section of *The Call of the Wild* illustrated that Jack London’s far north was a place where only the fittest survived. London described a gold discovery where Thornton, whose virtuous nature had saved Buck from certain death earlier in the story, had finally struck it rich. Thornton and his crew were “toiling like giants,” London wrote, with “days flashing on the heels of days like dreams as they heaped the treasure up.” Success was short lived, as the men were murdered by Indians, only to be avenged by the

⁷⁸ London, 778, 783, 786, 810.

now wild Buck.⁷⁹ These depictions of Alaska as a place where strength and cunning allowed for survival, and morality was best suited to circumstances, were wildly popular with the American public. London followed *Call of the Wild*, with *White Fang* (1906), another bestseller in the United States. Both works perpetuated impressions of Alaska as a bonanza frontier in the American imagination.

London's contemporary, John Muir similarly depicted Alaska as a frontier. In Muir's *Travels in Alaska* (1915), the naturalist conjured the place as a final reserve for wild nature, a large undeveloped space where the intrepid could escape the domesticity of the contiguous United States. *Travels* recounted Muir's 1879, 1880, and 1890 explorations by foot and canoe of the mountains and waterways of Southeast Alaska.

Muir, a naturalist and conservationist, was intensely spiritual, and as David Rains Wallace observed: "[his] main mission was to contemplate *all* nature as a witness to divine creation."⁸⁰ Alaska represented an undeveloped nature prime for contemplation, a margin of wild space. *Travels* focused on Muir's first expedition to Alaska in 1879. Although missionaries, traders, and prospectors were scattered throughout the region, much of the district was then unexplored by white people. An astute observer and evocative writer, Muir made a number of accurate natural history observations, including that Southeast Alaska's topography resulted from glaciation: "the very existence of the islands, their features, finish, and peculiar distribution, are all immediately referable to ice-action during the great glacial winter just now drawing to a close."⁸¹

Over a three-month period in 1879, using Fort Wrangell as his base, Muir made several trips by steamer, which allowed him opportunity to gain familiarity with the

⁷⁹ Ibid, 820.

⁸⁰ David Rains Wallace, foreword to *Travels in Alaska*, by John Muir (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), v.

⁸¹ Muir, 18.

forests and mountains of the region. In October, he set out with the missionary S. Hall Young, and three Tlingit guides, touring 800 miles in an open canoe, meeting many indigenous people, and in the process “discovering” Glacier Bay, guided there by one of his Indian companions, Charley. Muir’s depiction of his Tlingit guides reflected his Euro-centric orientation. He described the Tlingit as more attractive than other minorities: “All seemed to be light-hearted and jolly, with work enough and wit enough to maintain health and comfort. . . . They are pale copper colored, have small feet and hands, are not at all negroish in lips or cheeks like some of the coast tribes, nor so thickset, short-necked, or heavy-featured in general.” Later, when describing a nighttime star-scape to S. Hall Young and his Tlingit guides, Muir referred to the Tlingits condescendingly, stating that their: “eager, childlike attention was refreshing to see.”⁸² Muir’s patronizing tone reflected a history of colonialism, one that marginalized Alaska’s original inhabitants and all indigenous groups, relegating them to the “other” category and overlooking their sophisticated culture and systems of knowledge, and the fact that Alaska Natives were the original inhabitants and owners of the wild expanse that Muir “discovered.”

On the other hand, Muir also expressed disdain for Euro-American society. He described, “the deathlike apathy of weary town-dwellers, in whom natural curiosity has been quenched in toil and care and poor shallow comfort.” He recognized civilization’s negative effects on himself, writing: “the care-laden commercial lives we lead close our eyes to the operations of God as a workman, though openly carried on that all who will look may see.”⁸³ Both statements exemplified Wallace’s observation, that, “Calvinism regarded humanity as unworthy of God, and Muir remained Calvinist enough that he

⁸² Ibid, 77, 156.

⁸³ Ibid, 234.

tended to view people as too petty and artificial for divine nature.”⁸⁴ Contrasting his general distaste for humanity, Muir wrote reverently of the wild, glaciated landscape in Southeast Alaska: “Standing here, with facts so fresh and telling and held up so vividly before us, every seeing observer, not to say geologist, must readily apprehend the earth-sculpturing, landscape-making action of flowing ice. And here, too, one learns that the world, though made, is yet being made; that this is still the morning of creation.”⁸⁵

Muir returned to Alaska in 1880 for further exploration. On this trip he wrote: “How delightful it is, and how it makes one’s pulses bound to get back into the reviving northland wilderness! How truly wild it is, and how joyously one’s heart responds to the welcome it gives, its water and mountains shining and glowing like enthusiastic human faces!”⁸⁶ These remarks reflected Muir’s belief in nature’s restorative effects, sentiments that, according to Robert Campbell, helped popularize Southeast Alaska as a tourist destination. Much of what later became *Travels in Alaska* was published in the 1880s as magazine articles. Read by a national audience, Muir’s depictions of wilderness and indigenous culture stimulated early Inside Passage cruise ship tourism. Marketing by the Pacific Coast Steamship Company reflected Muir’s belief that wilderness experience had restorative effects: “Having arrived Home [from Alaska]: You will find your eyes clear and sparkling, your appetite keen, your step more elastic, [and] your general health immensely improved. . . . You will have lots of stories to tell of your experiences, which will make you the lion of your social gathering.”⁸⁷ Although the five thousand passengers who traveled the Inside Passage in 1890 hardly compare to the 1.5 million

⁸⁴ Wallace, in Muir’s *Travels in Alaska*, ix.

⁸⁵ Muir, 67.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 207.

⁸⁷ Robert Campbell, *In Darkest Alaska: Travel and Empire Along the Inside Passage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 264.

annually in Alaska today, early tourism operations sold Alaska to its wealthy visitors as a place to escape the toils of the industrializing world, noting that natural vistas and Alaska Natives were equally available for viewing.⁸⁸

Muir's purpose in publishing his journals was in large part spiritual. He described an aurora borealis event seen on his final expedition in 1890: "magnificent upright bars of light in bright prismatic colors suddenly appeared, marching swiftly in close succession along the northern horizon from west to east as if in diligent haste. . . . How long these glad, eager soldiers of light held on their way I cannot tell; for sense of time was charmed out of my mind and the blessed night circled away in measureless rejoicing enthusiasm."⁸⁹ Muir, exemplifying Linda Graber's concept of the wilderness purist, revered wild nature. His use of lyrical and evocative language conveyed an emotional response to Alaska's landscape, and like London, he marginalized the far north. Alaska, a wilderness frontier, offered escape for the fit from an oppressively domesticated society.

Thirty years later, after the turn of the century gold rushes had run their course, environmentalist Robert Marshal perpetuated Alaska's frontier romance, depicting the place as conducive to a utopian existence, and its residents as exceptional. Marshall, an academically trained forester and early twentieth century conservationist, came to Alaska in 1929 to study tree growth at the northern timberline and to identify land for potential wilderness designation. In a 1937 report on Alaska's recreational value, Marshall recommended that: "all of Alaska north of the Yukon River should be designated as wilderness, [believing that] in Alaska alone can the emotional values of the frontier be

⁸⁸ Ibid, 49.

⁸⁹ Muir, 314.

preserved.”⁹⁰ A conservationist of John Muir’s pedigree, Marshall was credited with “discovering” most of the central Brooks Range, an area now preserved as Gates of the Arctic National Park, and was a founding member of the Wilderness Society.

Intrigued by the “arctic individualism” he observed in the southern Brooks Range community of Wiseman, Marshall returned to the area in August of 1930 with the sole purpose of studying the inhabitants of the community. Like London and Muir before him, Marshall depicted Alaska as a resource bonanza and undeveloped wilderness, and the people of Wiseman, the focus of *Arctic Village*, as inhabitants of a social utopia. A gifted statistician, Marshall developed empirical data on many aspects of the villagers’ lives. The book’s publication in 1933 was well received by the people of Wiseman, even though Marshall had not asked for their permission to write about them.

In chronicling Wiseman society, Marshall set out to capture the exceptionality of the community. “Work in the Koyukuk [was] done on a much more leisurely basis than Outside,” he noted, which allowed residents of the rural community a greater sense of accomplishment and contentment. Resourcefulness was essential to survival, as “the work of the Koyukuk was so varied . . . that unless a man [had] better than normal ability, he would be swamped under the casual necessities of life.” The critical thinking necessary to thrive in Wiseman, and the isolation and wilderness setting created, in Marshall’s view, an environment that fostered self-development and discovery. Marshall believed that the far north created: “men so rare and exceptional that the most ordinary individual takes on an importance impossible to conceive in the outside world.” While the rugged conditions required resourcefulness and ingenuity in Wiseman’s residents, they

⁹⁰ Robert Marshall, *Arctic Village: A 1930s Portrait of Wiseman, Alaska* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1991), xxi.

valued the simple joys of life. They believed that: “good times, unselfishly attained, were the fundamental considerations of existence.”⁹¹

Marshall presented existence in Wiseman, a remote community in a harsh climate on the edge of modern civilization, as utopian. “There is not only economic independence in the Koyukuk, but also the most complete liberty one can imagine . . . For most people with minds sufficiently vigorous to do their own thinking this freedom of thought and action seems to be a genuine incentive to happiness.”⁹² Although the subjects of Wiseman’s study reportedly responded well to its publication,⁹³ Marshall’s “discovery” of Wiseman, like Muir’s discovery of Glacier Bay, illustrates a colonial attitude, depicting the place as foreign and exotic, one more image of a northern frontier, packaged for consumption by the Great Depression-era American public.

Early twentieth century Alaska literature reflects common cultural perceptions of an exceptional Alaska and a wilderness frontier. These themes are informed by the texts reviewed above: Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild* (1903), John Muir’s *Travels in Alaska* (1915) and Robert Marshall’s *Arctic Village* (1933). All three books are still in print and share wide readership, cultivating ideas for past and contemporary generations of the American public that Alaska is a frontier wilderness whose residents value independence and self-reliance.

⁹¹ Marshall, 105, 55, 198, 363.

⁹² Ibid, 377.

⁹³ Terrence Cole, preface to *Arctic Village: A 1930s Portrait of Wiseman, Alaska*, by Robert Marshall (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1991), xviii.

2.3.2 Changing Landscapes and Lifestyles

Unlike the depictions in the previous section, in which London, Muir, and Marshall describe Alaska as an extension of the Western frontier, John Haines, Sydney Huntington, and John McPhee capture the complexity of the changing landscape and lifestyles of modern Alaska. Their books convey elements of rugged individualism, and share the adventure of life in rural, and often wild Alaska, but they depict the place more as a home, or center of existence, than as an exotic site of adventure at the margin.

John Haines' *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire*, a memoir of time spent near Richardson, Alaska, documented the rural lifestyle of his aging sourdough neighbors, depicting the importance of landscape and community. Many rural Alaskans in the mid-twentieth century augmented their subsistence hunting and fishing with seasonal income from trapping and gold mining. Subsistence, and the extreme seasonality of Interior Alaska, were central themes in Haines' work. The poet reflected on his own relocation to the region: "Who comes here, to this whiteness, this far and frozen place, in search of something he cannot name? Not wealth, it may be, but a fortune of the spirit, freshness denied him in the place he came from. The North glitters and brightens; then grows dark again, and the fugitive glow from the gas mantle alone lights the shadows."⁹⁴

Haines chose the rural subarctic as a counterpoint to urban life. Having purchased a one hundred sixty acre homestead eighty miles from Fairbanks, the author spent three decades living on his land and writing, occasionally leaving Alaska, then returning. Like Thoreau, Haines found the simplicity provided by his homestead restorative. "What does a person do in a place like this, so far away and alone? For one thing, he watches the

⁹⁴ John Haines, *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire: Twenty-Five Years in the Alaska Wilderness* (Minneapolis: Greywolf Press, 1989), 36.

weather—the stars, the snow, the fire.” A willing participant of the frontier romance, the poet reflected: “I am living out a dream in these woods. Old dreams of the Far North, old stories read and absorbed: of snow and dogs, of moose and lynx, and of all that is still native to these unpeopled places. Nothing I have yet done in life pleases me as much as this.”⁹⁵

When Haines arrived in Richardson in 1947, many of the sourdoughs, or crusty old-timers, from turn of the century gold rushes were gone, and those who remained were very old; the relationships he shared with the aging residents proved central to his sense of place. He believed that “[t]he land lived in its people,” and when the roadhouse era men and women died, a culture died too. Haines’ memoir ended when he returned to Richardson, only to find it empty. He concluded: “I, who at this age loved solitude, knew that this was death, the loneliest solitude of all.” Without its human occupants, “the entire landscape seemed dark and empty, the vast Interior a place of snow and silence.” The quiet of the sourdough culture’s passing made Alaska muted, and left Haines profoundly disoriented.⁹⁶ Wistful about the changes he witnessed as the sourdough era closed, John Haines depicted mid-twentieth century Alaskan experience, but he remained an outsider, one who interpreted Alaska romantically.

Sydney Huntington, born of Alaska and bridging Koyukon Athabascan and sourdough culture, lived through the same changes that Haines wrote of, but he responded pragmatically, adapting to the changes of the mid and late twentieth century. For Huntington, Alaska was home, the setting for a lifetime lived out on a changing landscape.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 71,75.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 146, 119, 162.

Shadows on the Koyukuk, the memoir of Sidney Huntington, depicted the remarkable changes brought to rural Alaska by the twentieth century. Huntington was born in 1915 in Hughes, Alaska, an Athabaskan community built on the edge of the Koyukuk River, to an Athabaskan mother and raised in the prospecting and trapping lifestyle of his English-Scot father.

Childhood stories told Huntington by his Koyukon elders illustrated that: “all thoughts and energies were aimed at survival. After about 1850, when rifles and shotguns were available, starvation largely ended for Alaska’s Athapaskans.” Christian missionaries arrived in rural Alaska in the mid-nineteenth century, bringing with them Western ways of knowing. Huntington believed that missionaries aided Native cultures in adapting to Western culture and lifeways. “The church fulfilled a need in Alaska when that need was great. It was a time of transition for the Natives from their original life of living off the land and migrating in search of food, to a partial dollar trade economy as permanent settlements became established around trading posts.”⁹⁷

At Huntington’s birth, life in bush Alaska reflected the region’s remoteness. Food storage was a challenge, and “for bush residents in those years, beans commonly took the place of fresh meat, providing protein in summer when there was no way to freeze meat.” Transport in and out of the Koyukuk in the early 1900s occurred by boat or dog sled, and “the monthly mail run was the sole contact with the outside world for miners and prospectors. There was no radio. There were no airplanes.”⁹⁸ Survival in early twentieth century Alaska required self-sufficiency. Huntington’s cultural resilience allowed him to thrive.

⁹⁷ Sidney Huntington and James Rearden, *Shadows on the Koyukuk* (Portland: Alaska Northwest Books, 1993), 135, 43.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 77.

In the early twentieth century, many Native children were forced to relocate to Christian-based boarding schools where they frequently were forbidden to speak their native languages. Huntington attended school in Alatna, followed by Eklutna, completing the third grade. Despite the hardships of relocation and assimilation, Huntington appreciated his time in school, reminiscing: “the single most valuable skill I learned was how to read. Reading opened a new world for me, and enabled me to educate myself in any subject.”⁹⁹

On returning to his Koyukuk River community, the twelve-year-old Huntington had already survived the death of his mother, near starvation, and the assimilationist educational practices of Territorial Alaska. By fourteen, he was functioning as a financially independent adult, successfully operating his own trap line, a practice he continued for much of his life. Like many individuals in bush Alaska, Huntington struggled with alcohol abuse. Describing this period, Huntington recalled: “I sold the stuff, but often I was my own best customer. Eventually, I felt I needed booze all the time. I tried tapering off, but it didn’t work. I suppose I would have been classified as an alcoholic.”¹⁰⁰ After blacking out drunk and nearly freezing to death on his trap line, Huntington quit drinking, and spent the second half of his life as a role model of moderation and self-control.

Both Natives and non-Natives in Alaska’s rural Interior relied on subsistence practices as a means of survival. Huntington understood that excessive harvest of animals in any one part of the Koyukuk drainage would impact their long-term availability. Once while hunting, Huntington chose not to take a large moose. He recalled: “he was a bigger

⁹⁹ Ibid, 83.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 63.

animal than I wanted. A few days later I killed another, smaller bull, which provided us with our winter's meat."¹⁰¹ Huntington's stewardship in taking only what he needed reflected a deep connection with the landscape. "I didn't feel as if I owned it—I was, simply, a part of it, and it was beautiful and wonderful."¹⁰² Game management in early twentieth century Alaska was minimal. Game officers existed, but were few, and were limited in their scope by the transportation realities of pre-airplane Alaska.

Acknowledging the cultural reliance of Alaska Natives on subsistence, the Alaska Game Law of 1925 gave subsistence preference to indigenous groups, and tasked federal land managers with the conservation of Alaska wildlife.¹⁰³

Protecting wildlife populations for subsistence became more pressing in the 1930s, as the use of airplanes dramatically reduced travel time to rural communities, common starting points for urban hunters. Moreover, aviation changed public perceptions of Alaska's geography, leading to the Territory's increased strategic significance, and effectively ending many challenges of life in Alaska's early twentieth century. Aware of the changing times, the ever-resourceful Huntington taught himself construction techniques from a textbook. Having passed the journeyman-level exam, he enlisted as a carpenter in the US Army during World War II, and left the Koyukuk to build houses in Anchorage. Disconsolate away from rural Alaska, Huntington relocated to the Yukon River village of Galena, where he continued to aid the war effort. After the war, Huntington brought his large family to Galena, and worked there for thirty years as a general contractor. Seeking a means of creating employment opportunities in rural Alaska

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 181, 179.

¹⁰² Ibid, 199.

¹⁰³ Ken Ross, *Environmental Conflict in Alaska* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000), 4.

during this time of rapid socio-economic change, Huntington established a fish processing plant that stripped chum salmon of their roe and sold the delicacy to Asian markets. The business created jobs and economic security for local Koyukon Athabascans.

Within the parameters of twentieth century Alaska, Sydney Huntington offers an inspiring example of a remarkably adaptive human being. Although Huntington acknowledged that many of the old ways were gone, unlike Haines he did not mourn their passing, but instead adapted to modernity while continuing to practice his traditional lifestyle. *Shadows on the Koyukuk* presents an authentic depiction of resilience in the face of sometimes tumultuous change in twentieth century rural Alaska.

Beginning in the late twentieth century, John McPhee's *Coming into the Country* chronicles Alaska's transition from early twentieth century frontier to an era of clearly titled and apportioned land. The text places Alaska and the Far North squarely in the modern age, offering a window into contemporary land use complexities of the region.

McPhee's depictions of Alaska in *Coming Into the Country* focused on tensions within the young state. Land claims, both state and Alaska Native, created significant tensions in the 1970s, challenging traditional land uses of Native and non-Native residents, and forestalling the state's economic development.

As part of a reconnaissance party investigating a federal wild river designation, McPhee accompanied land managers on a descent of the Salmon River in Western Alaska. This adventure allowed the journalist perspective on the vastness of the state. “

The Kobuk Valley proposal of nearly two million acres . . . is relatively modest among ten other pieces of Alaska projected for confirmation as parks and

monuments, lands [that] constitute over thirty-two million acres . . . a total that would more than double the present size of the National Park system. Impressive as that may seem, it is less than a tenth of Alaska, which consists of three hundred and seventy-five million acres.¹⁰⁴

McPhee's participation in the Salmon River descent was related to land claim provisions in the 1958 Alaska Statehood Act and the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA). In the Statehood Act, the federal government ceded almost one hundred five million acres to Alaska from the existing federal domain, with the proviso that Alaska Native lands were to be unaffected until resolved. Following statehood and throughout the 1960s, arguments over state land selection and Native land claims left less than 1 percent of Alaska in private hands. Development pressure from the oil industry after the discovery of major reserves in Prudhoe Bay in 1968 motivated federal lawmakers to reconcile existing Alaska Native land claims, resulting in ANCSA, which awarded Alaska Natives forty-four million acres and \$963 million, to be managed by Alaska Native corporations. This settlement allowed the federal government to conserve eighty million acres of Alaska's remaining land in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980.

McPhee believed that ANCSA was a positive resolution of Alaska Native land claims, but "only insofar as [Alaska Natives] agreed to change their way—to cherish money, and to adopt the concept (for centuries unknown to them) of private property. Now the enforced drawing of lines on the land has created tensions among the Kobuk villages that did not exist before. Under the ingratiating Eskimo surface is a sense of

¹⁰⁴ John McPhee, *Coming Into the Country* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 18, 17.

grave disturbance.”¹⁰⁵ ANCSA’s corporate structure was designed to protect Alaska Native lands and collective settlement assets, to guard them for the benefit not only of the living generations, but future generations. The Act has done this, but it clearly also was assimilationist. In rather hyperbolic terms, McPhee declared: “For all its overt benefits and generous presentations, the bluntest requirement of [ANCSA] was that the Natives turn white.”¹⁰⁶ Although the Act has not turned Natives white, it imposed a land ownership and corporate structure that were foreign to Alaska Native peoples.

The land claims era also required that Alaska’s non-native populations adapt to modern, regulated land use concepts. The move to “lock up” parts of Alaska in preservationist status threatened historical land use by prospectors, trappers, and back-to-the-land squatters. Describing their attachment to the land and lifestyle they had pursued, McPhee wrote: “If gold first drew them to settle here, the country itself is what kept them—the rivers, the mountains, this immense wild range lying open to anyone who could meet its climatic terms.”¹⁰⁷ Preservation, the hard fought work of the wilderness and environmental movement, would evict these people from their beloved landscape and their homes. It was a tough sell for many rural Alaskans. They were losing their frontier. McPhee sympathized with them. While they had labored to create productive and meaningful lives on the frontier, and (seemingly) had harmed no one in the process, “the most inventive thing to do, as [the park service] saw it, was nothing. Let the land stand wild, without so much as a manmade trail. In its modern form, this was the tension of

¹⁰⁵ McPhee, 34-35.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 393.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 295.

preservation versus development, of stasis versus economic productivity, of wilderness versus the drill and the bulldozer.”¹⁰⁸

Reporting from the country around Eagle and Circle, rural and historical gold mining communities on the Yukon River, McPhee sided with the rural Alaskans. After spending time with river people and prospectors, groups under pressure from the National Park Service to relocate, McPhee championed their right to remain on the land and maintain their chosen lifestyles. “If I were writing the ticket, I would say that anyone at all is free to build a cabin on any federal land in the United States that is at least a hundred miles from the nearest town of ten thousand or more—the sole restriction being that you can’t carry in materials for walls or roofs or floors.”¹⁰⁹

John McPhee’s *Coming Into the Country* captured the tensions of the 1970s land claims era in Alaska. Entering the region as an outsider, he used participant observation methods to discover insider perspectives of this tumultuous time. Relying on Alaskans’ experiences and voices, he created a remarkably authentic insider perspective of a northern landscape in transition from wild and yet open to settlement by resourceful individuals, to regulated and preserved for humankind for posterity.

Like the three texts reviewed in the previous section, Haines’, Huntington’s, and McPhee’s books remain in print and continue to influence representations of Alaska as a wilderness and frontier. The frontier concept, which expressed notions of bonanza and untouched nature, and romanticized individual freedom and adventure, has been complicated by the resolution of land claims in Alaska. Nonetheless, depictions of Alaska

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 83.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 436.

available for state, national and international audiences continue to project frontier and wilderness images.

This literature review identifies depictions of Alaska that show the place as an exceptional frontier and wilderness. These depictions remain the dominant popular narrative by which Alaskans and others understand the state, a fact utilized by the tourism industry. To what extent do these concepts resonate with Alaska big-mountain cultural participants? This is the original contribution of my research.

2.4 Research Methods

Tourism is a developing industry in Alaska, creating job and career opportunities for residents and non-residents alike. Niche, big-mountain tourism—which places visitors in mountainous areas where they participate in guided activities like climbing and skiing—is growing in Alaska, due to extensive wild lands that draw visitors from all over the world. As a lifelong Alaskan who guides professionally, I am interested in whether and to what degree mountain tourism clients and guides identify with Alaska’s environment and culture. My purpose with this project is to analyze the attraction of niche big-mountain tourism in Alaska, an industry whose clients and professionals have not been studied in depth.

To analyze the motivations of clients and professionals in the big-mountain tourism industry in Alaska, I surveyed clients and interviewed guides at two Alaska mountain guiding businesses, the Alaska Mountaineering School (AMS), operating from Talkeetna, and Alaska Powder Descents (APD), operating from Juneau. Both clients and

guides participated voluntarily in this research. The Institutional Review Board of the University of Alaska Fairbanks approved the research: IRB #: 430893-1.

2.4.1 Client Survey

The client survey consisted of twenty-four questions and elicited information relating to three general topics: client motivations for engaging in big-mountain tourism, for hiring a guide, and for travel to engage in big mountain tourism. It began with demographic questions that gathered age, gender, and income information, and then transitioned to multi-variable assertions that required participants to rank statements on a scale of Important to Not Important.

During 2013, the AMS office staff and I asked clients after their climbs to complete a mountain tourism survey. We asked 70 percent of clients to participate, of which 24 percent participated; seventy AMS clients submitted surveys. Occasionally, office staff was too busy to ask clients to fill out a survey, but there is no reason to believe that non-participation in the survey was correlated with survey variables or demographic characteristics; non-participation was, for the purposes of sample selection, random.

Similarly, various heli-ski guides and I asked approximately 70 percent of APD clients prior to their heli-ski trips to complete mountain tourism surveys, of which 30 percent participated; twenty-four APD clients submitted surveys. Occasionally, as with AMS, pre-trip operations were too busy, and clients on those days were not asked to participate, though as above, non-participation was essentially random. Those who agreed to participate received a survey prior to their heli-ski outing. An employee of each

business stored completed surveys in their respective offices until the end of their operating season, and then mailed them to me.

To assess my survey data, I entered responses from ninety-four surveys, seventy from AMS and twenty-four from APD, into a spreadsheet and coded answers numerically. With this data, I derived statement significance, using the results to compare respondent answers, then aggregating statements as “Strongly Important,” “Not Important,” or split evenly. In Chapter 3, I analyze responses according to their placement within the three categories of the survey.

2.4.2 Guide Interview

I organized the twenty-one-question guide interview into three sections, asking participants to respond to five demographic and fifteen open-ended questions. The interview assessed guides’ motivations for engaging in big-mountain tourism, their length of participation, and changes they had observed over time.

To contact each company’s respective guides, I reached out to the office managers at AMS and APD, who shared a roster of employees and their telephone numbers. Over the course of 2013 and 2014, I contacted fifteen guides, and interviewed eleven of them, seven from AMS, and four from APD. The four guides who did not respond were guiding internationally and unavailable. I recorded all eleven interviews as audio files. I conducted four interviews in person; the rest took place with a recorder via telephone. Guides were enthusiastic about the interview process. In 2015 and 2016, I completed transcriptions of each interview.

To assess my interview data, I reviewed the transcriptions, searching for common themes. Chapter Four synthesizes guides' views as they pertain to the three categories of the interview. I drew upon numerous individual statements to illustrate their perspectives.

2.4.3 Guiding Company Profiles, Geographic Setting of Talkeetna and Juneau

AMS is based in Talkeetna and owned by Colby Coombs and Caitlin Palmer. AMS employs between fifty and seventy people in an operating season and offers mountaineering instruction and guided climbing in the Central Alaska Range. AMS is one of six concessionaires whom the National Park Service allows to guide Denali. The company launched in 1992, and began guiding Denali in 1999 after taking over the concession of Alaska Denali Guiding (ADG). The owners live year round in Talkeetna and are the only concessionaires (owners) in Denali National Park who are Alaska residents.

Talkeetna's location in Southcentral Alaska, in close proximity to the Alaska Range, makes it a destination for Alaska Range climbers. A hub for ski-plane service, Talkeetna hosts multiple air-taxi providers who cater to mountain climbers and tourists, alike. Storied bush pilot Joe Crosson landed the first ski plane on Denali in 1932, flying from Talkeetna and landing at 5,200 feet on the Muldrow Glacier.¹¹⁰

The Alaska Range lies 45 miles to the northwest of Talkeetna, and Denali's West Buttress Base Camp is located 20 miles further in that direction, thus requiring a flight of 40 minutes on average. As of 2010, Talkeetna is home to 876 people. The town grew in 1916 as a district headquarters for the Alaska Railroad. Talkeetna lies on Alaska's road

¹¹⁰ Denali National Park and Preserve, "Historical Timeline," last modified January 15, 2017, <https://www.nps.gov/dena/planyourvisit/climbinghistory.htm>.

system, as well. Anchorage is 115 miles and 2.5 hours to the south, and Fairbanks lies 275 miles and 4.5 hours to the north.

Denali, at 20,310 feet/6140 meters, is the highest mountain in North America. It lies in the Central Alaska Mountain Range at 63°4'9"N, 151°0'23"W, making it the tallest high-latitude mountain in the world. Under clear weather conditions, residents of Anchorage, 130 miles to the south-southwest, and Fairbanks, 170 miles to the north-northeast, can view Denali. When measured from lowest contour to highest point, Denali is the largest mountain on the planet, and third largest in prominence, a measurement of total surface area, trailing behind Argentina's Aconcagua and Nepal's Everest.

Denali represents an extreme mountain environment. Snow and glacier permanently cover the upper half of the mountain. A weather station at 18,700 feet has recorded winter temperatures as low as -77F, and estimated wind speeds of more than 200 miles per hour. Because of its high latitude, Denali has lower barometric pressure than other high mountains in more tropical regions. Atmospheric pressure decreases with altitude, but varies depending on air temperature. Closer to the poles, the atmosphere is colder, and atmospheric pressure drops off more quickly with altitude, making the climbing experience on Denali comparable to higher Himalayan peaks.¹¹¹

Denali is the centerpiece of Denali National Park and Preserve. Noted naturalist Charles Sheldon and other prominent citizens lobbied Congress to create Mt. McKinley National Park early in the twentieth century. Sheldon had noticed dramatic declines in wild animal species along the 470 mile Alaska Rail Road corridor after its construction between 1914 and 1923. Sheldon believed that wildlife populations were being depleted because of increased access to the region by railroad, and he was instrumental in

¹¹¹ Adam Helman, *The Finest Peaks, Prominence and other Mountain Measures* (Victoria: Trafford, 2005), 3-4.

communicating Denali's unique natural qualities to a national audience.¹¹² Congress established the park in 1917.

Denali, the mountain's Athabascan name, has been contested throughout the twentieth century. The geologist and gold miner William Dickey named the peak Mt. McKinley in 1896, in honor of presidential candidate William McKinley, because McKinley had supported the gold standard. Hudson Stuck, who participated in the first successful ascent of the mountain in 1913, wrote an account of the climb, titled, *Ascent of Denali*, in the preface of which he called for a return to the indigenous name.¹¹³ The state of Alaska officially changed the mountain's name from Mt McKinley to Denali in 1975, requesting the federal government follow suit. When the park was tripled in size in 1980, and renamed Denali National Park and Preserve, the official name of the peak remained Mt McKinley. In 2015, with the support of President Barack Obama, the mountain's name officially returned to Denali. More than 400,000 people visit Denali National Park and Preserve each year, generally between May and September.¹¹⁴

Walter Harper, a twenty-year old Athabascan member of the Stuck-Karstens Expedition, was the first to stand atop Denali on June 7, 1913. By 2016, an estimated 32,000 people had attempted to climb Denali, with an average success rate of 50 percent. An average of 1100 climbers annually register to climb Denali, mostly ascending the mountain via the West Buttress, a route pioneered by Bradford Washburn in 1951.¹¹⁵ The West Buttress route is heavily glaciated. It begins on the Southeast fork of the Kahiltna Glacier at 7,200 feet, and extends 11.1 miles to Denali's South Summit. Expeditions to

¹¹² Brinkley, 142.

¹¹³ Hudson Stuck, *The Ascent of Denali* (New York: Scribner, 1914), xi.

¹¹⁴ Denali National Park and Preserve, "Historical Timeline," last modified January 15, 2017, <https://www.nps.gov/dena/planyourvisit/climbinghistory.htm>.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

Denali average seventeen to twenty-one days, with initial individual climber loads averaging over one hundred pounds. Because of its unpredictable weather, including cold temperatures and high winds, and its high altitude, climbing Denali is a significant challenge.¹¹⁶

Kevin Krein owns the Juneau-based APD, which he co-founded in 2007. The company employs eight to fifteen people in an operating season and offers day and multi-day ski guiding on the Juneau Icefield, and surrounding areas of the Juneau road system. APD is one of many helicopter-assisted ski guiding companies operating in Alaska, but is the only company permitted to operate in the Juneau area.

Juneau, the capital of Alaska, is located in the southeastern portion of the state, and is home to 31,275 people. The community is unique among U.S. capitals as there are no roads connecting it to the rest of the state or continent, although ferry service is available for cars. The extremely rugged terrain surrounding Juneau explains its isolation. The community sits at sea level, with tides averaging 16 feet, below steep mountains, ranging from 3,000 to 7,000 feet high. Atop these mountains, 35 miles wide and 150 miles long, lies the Juneau Icefield, the third deepest ice cap on the planet, from which thirty named glaciers flow.¹¹⁷ Founded in 1880 by gold miners, and home to the indigenous Tlingit, who have occupied the area for thousands of years, Juneau became Alaska's capital in 1906. The city's daily population can increase by roughly 6,000 people from visiting cruise ships between the months of May and September.

Heli-skiing has existed in Juneau since the late 1970s, with skiers travelling from all over the world to ski the Coast Mountains between Juneau, Haines, Cordova, and

¹¹⁶ Colby Coombs, *Denali's West Buttress* (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1997), 63-64, 100.

¹¹⁷ Calvin Heusser, *Juneau Icefield Research Project (1949-1958), A Retrospective* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2007), 15, 18.

Valdez. All of APD's helicopter skiing trips occur in the Tongass National Forest, whose seventeen million acres make it the largest national forest in the United States. President Theodore Roosevelt established the Alexander Archipelago Reserve in 1902, a reserve that would later become the Tongass in 1907.¹¹⁸ About 40 percent of the Tongass National Forest is non-timbered, including the Juneau Icefield; these alpine zones are the primary areas in which APD is permitted to heli-ski.

¹¹⁸ Brinkley, 53.

Chapter 3 Big-Mountain Tourism Client Survey, Results and Analysis

I reviewed ninety-four mountain tourism surveys, seventy from AMS clients, and twenty-four from APD clients. The survey consisted of three sections:

- a) Motivations for engaging in mountain tourism.
- b) Motivations for hiring a guide.
- c) Motivations for travelling to engage in mountain tourism

3.1 Client Demographics

As I suspected, most surveyed mountain tourism clients earned an annual income of \$100,000 or more per year (Figure 1).

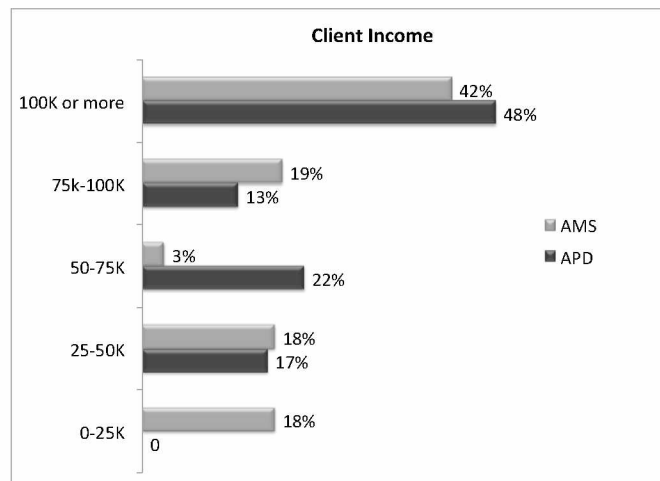


Figure 1: Client Income

At AMS, surveyed clients ranged in age from seventeen to sixty-seven, with a mean age of thirty-nine. At APD, surveyed clients ranged in age from twenty-six to forty-six, with a mean age of thirty-five. At AMS, 21 percent were from Alaska. At

APD, 8 percent were from Alaska. The majority of clients at both operations were from the west and east coasts of North America. Of the surveyed clientele, nearly 80 percent were male (Figure 2).

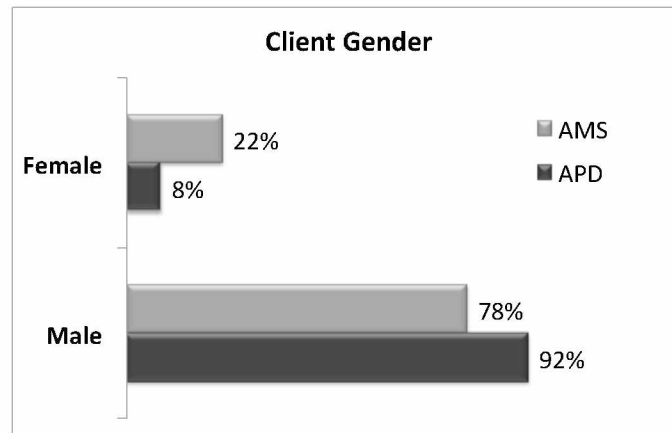


Figure 2: Client Gender

3.2 Motivations for Engaging in Big-Mountain Tourism

The survey asked clients to consider what motivates them to engage in mountain tourism. It asked them to rank from “Not Important” to “Very Important” twelve possible motivating factors. With this data, I derived statement significance, using the results to compare respondent answers, then aggregating statements as “Strongly Important,” “Not Important,” or split evenly. To my surprise, 97 percent of AMS clients, and 100 percent of APD clients, ranked enjoyment of being outside as strongly important—higher than any other motivation. I expected that those surveyed would be most motivated by travel to Alaska—the Alaska mystique—or by an attraction to risk, but interest in Alaska as a destination was not as strong as enjoyment of being outside. Respondents also ranked “The activity makes me feel more alive” as a robust motivator for their participation in big-mountain tourism. Of AMS clients, 89 percent said this motivation was strongly

important; fully 92 percent of APD clients marked strongly important for this motivator. Still, Alaska as a destination ranked very high among respondents; 71 percent of AMS clients, and 92 percent of APD clients responded that their feeling that Alaska is different from elsewhere strongly motivated them (Figure 3).

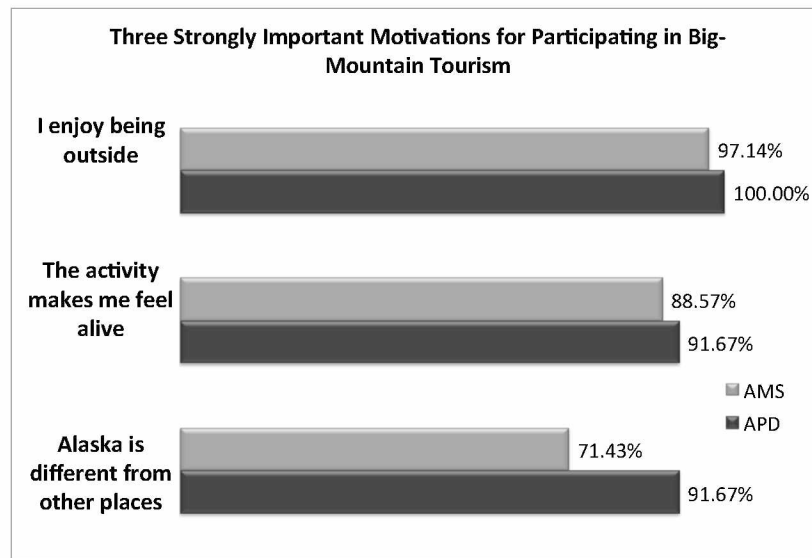


Figure 3: Three Strongly Important Motivations for Participating in Big-Mountain Tourism

The data thus indicates surveyed clients are motivated to participate in niche big-mountain tourism because it occurs outside, relating well to John Muir’s musings on the benefits of nature pursuits from one hundred years past. “How delightful it is,” Muir wrote, “and how it makes one’s pulses bound to get back into the reviving northland wilderness! How truly wild it is, and how joyously one’s heart responds to the welcome it gives, its water and mountains shining and glowing like enthusiastic human faces!”¹ Alaska’s unique landscape clearly motivates big-mountain participants. These people travel here to seek out the geographically exceptional mountaineering associated with the

¹ Muir, 207.

place. Mountain activities, and the “wild” Alaska setting, are primary motivators for big-mountain tourists.

Next the survey sought to measure clients’ risk seeking tendencies. Surprisingly, only 50 percent of AMS clients and 58 percent of APD clients responded that enjoying taking risks was strongly important in motivating them to participate, whereas, close to half of the study participants indicated that enjoyment of risk taking was not important as a motivator. In an industry with significant inherent risks, such data suggests that clients hire mountain guides to minimize hazard.²

I hypothesized that mountain tourists were attracted to Alaska’s place and culture, one with a strong emphasis on rugged individualism. To my surprise, only 45.7 percent of AMS clients and 45.8 percent of APD clients, think the statement “Alaskans are Self Reliant,” was strongly important as a motivating factor for visiting Alaska for mountain tourism. And, close to 50 percent of both groups said it was not important. Client response indicates that mountain tourists do not appear to be strongly attracted by the Alaskan self-reliance that is commonly portrayed in Alaska literature and discussed in this paper’s literature review. Surveyed clients come to Alaska to climb and ski, but not because of the image in popular culture of Alaskans as self-reliant, rugged individualists (Figure 4).

² Kevin Krein, “Nature and Risk in Adventure Sports,” in *Philosophy, Risk, and Adventure Sport*, ed. Mike McNamee (New York: Rutledge, 2007), 80. The survey data agrees with the thesis of a contemporary adventure sports philosopher, who argues that while risk is inseparable from many adventure sports, risking death or serious injury is not *the* point of participating in them. Adventure sports involve a kind of interaction with the natural world that is not found in other sporting activities, and the experience of such interaction is valuable enough to justify the acceptance of risks that accompany such activities. Mountain tourism participants accept the risks of mountaineering because big-mountain climbing and skiing are rewarding enough to justify participation even with known and acknowledged hazards. That said, clients hire mountain guides to manage the mountain environment and minimize its inherent risks.

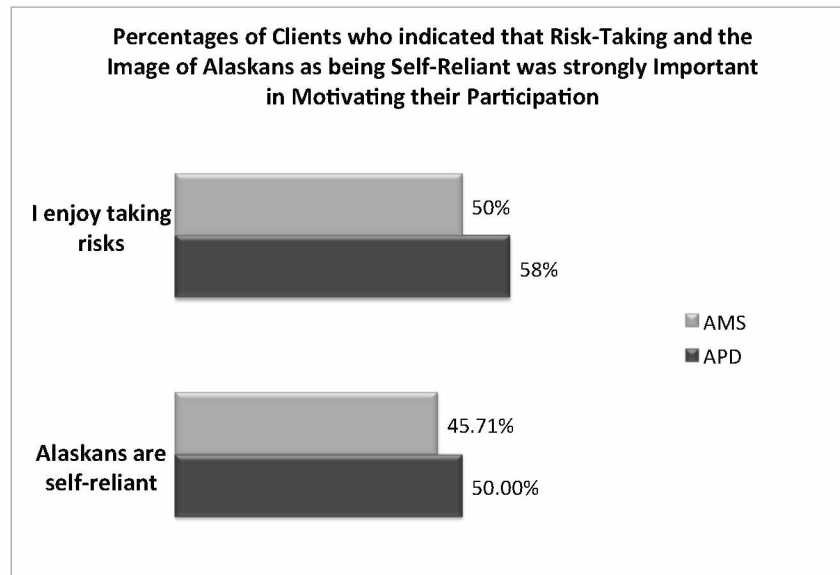


Figure 4: Percentages of Clients who indicated that Risk-Taking and the Image of Alaskans as being Self-Reliant was Strongly Important in Motivating their Participation

One objective of the big-mountain tourism survey was to test the hypothesis that people accept the risks of big mountain climbing and skiing because they identify a reward from the activity that justifies the risk. Survey results strongly supported this hypothesis. Both APD and AMS clients said that being outside was strongly important, and that their chosen activities made them feel alive—valued benefits of mountaineering and big mountain skiing. Enjoyment of risk taking was not a strong motivator.

Respondents were also ambivalent about Alaska as a frontier. Alaska is depicted by tourism and in literature as a wild landscape, and I hypothesized that its exceptional natural spaces made it a destination for tourists. Indeed, 67 percent of AMS and APD clients surveyed felt it is strongly important Alaska is wilderness, pristine, and different from other places. These findings align well with a common thesis of adventure tourism scholarship that mountains and wild places can function as escape destinations that offer thrills, inspiration, and adventure. But only 34 percent of AMS clients, and 50 percent of

APD clients, responded that the state's Last Frontier nickname was strongly important in their choice of Alaska as a destination. This data indicates that a prevailing theme in Alaska's literature, that the state is an extension of the frontier of the nineteenth century American West, one populated by hardy, independent people, is not important for visiting climber and skier mountain tourists (Figure 5). It is possible that these popular perceptions of Alaska resonate more strongly with other tourists to the state.

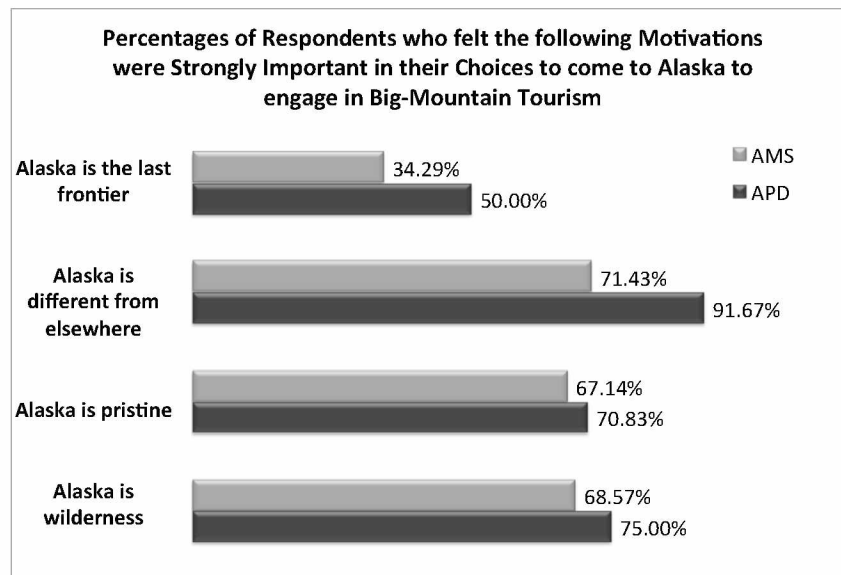


Figure 5: Percentages of Respondents who felt the following Motivations were Strongly Important in their Choices to come to Alaska to engage in Big-Mountain Tourism

Climbers and skiers differed significantly in their responses to two suggested motivations for participating in mountain tourism. Climbers were far more goal-oriented than skiers, with 89 percent of AMS climbers reporting that setting and achieving goals was strongly important, compared to only 58 percent of APD skiers. Skiers, on the other hand, reported enjoyment of being in small groups as being strongly important, compared to only 46 percent of AMS climbers. I attribute these motivational differences to

practical realities of each sport, and to the specific conditions in which climbers and skiers in this study participated (Figure 6).

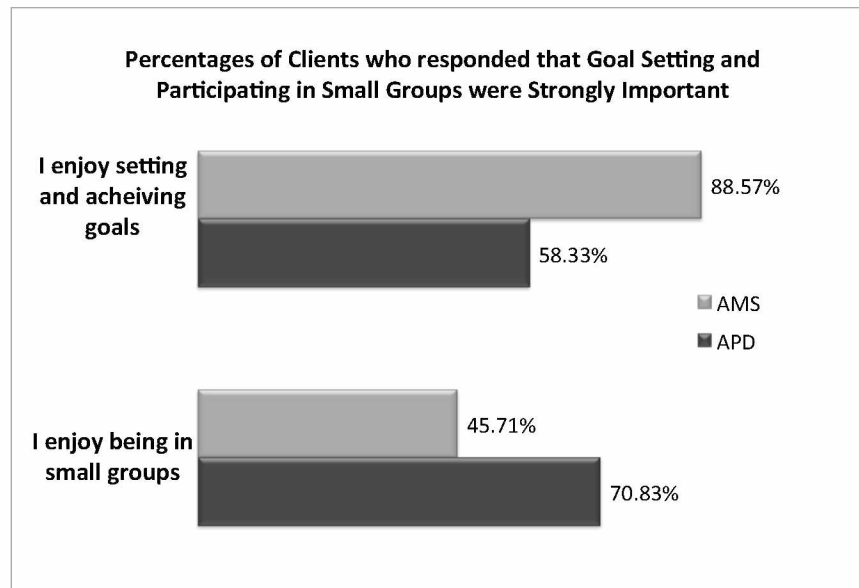


Figure 6: Percentages of Clients who responded that Goal Setting and Participating in Small Groups were Strongly Important

Climbing is goal oriented. A focus of expedition mountaineering is on the completion of a route to a mountain's summit, over a period of days or weeks. Expedition climbing is also a small group activity, as glaciated Alaskan mountains require that multiple climbers tie into a rope length to manage the risks of crevasse fall. For the surveyed AMS climber clients, like many other climbers, the team effort required to attain the goal is less important than reaching the goal itself.

APD skiers, on the other hand, reported enjoying being in small groups and indicated less interest in attaining goals. Big-mountain skiing is more group oriented than climbing because it involves short bursts of skill/reward that are reinforced when shared. Even human-powered backcountry skiing is a social activity; some people ski in the

backcountry alone, but they are a minority, because of avalanche risk, etc. On a practical level, skiing big mountains with a helicopter, although similar to expedition climbing in its setting, and governed by the same mountain dynamics of weather and snow conditions, is focused on completing as many runs as possible in a single day. Renting helicopters is expensive. To maximize profits, heli-ski guides will not run trips unless each seat on the aircraft is filled. Heli-skiers understand the operational challenges of heli-skiing. Sensitive to the exceptional cost of the activity, they often sign up as small groups, and most guide companies offer discounts for group bookings. This practical consideration helps explain why heli-skiing, although still goal-oriented, is more of a group activity.

3.3 Motivations for Hiring a Guide

Next the survey asked clients to indicate what motivated them to hire a guide. Options included: a) the activity is dangerous; b) it's important to be safe; c) Alaskan guide services are professional. A purpose of this section of the survey was to test the hypothesis that people attempt to mediate the risks of mountain climbing and skiing by hiring professional mountain guides.

APD and AMS clients answered the questions in this section similarly, but the importance of various rationales for hiring a guide differed based on their status as a climber or skier. Heli-skiing has significantly higher exposure to avalanches, a lethal mountain hazard, than climbing. Skiers are keenly aware of the dangers of avalanche, and may think their activity is so dangerous it should only be undertaken with a guide. Of the APD skiers, 58 percent responded that the risks inherent in the activity were strongly

important in motivating them to hire a guide, compared to 36 percent of AMS climbers who were thus motivated. Similarly, 92 percent of APD skiers thought that safety was strongly important, compared to 53 percent of AMS climbers. A final data point from this section of the survey further illustrates skiers' awareness of the hazards of the big mountain environment, coupled with their prioritization of safety. Seventy-one percent of APD skiers responded that it was strongly important that Alaska mountain guides are professional, compared to 53 percent of AMS clients (Figure 7).

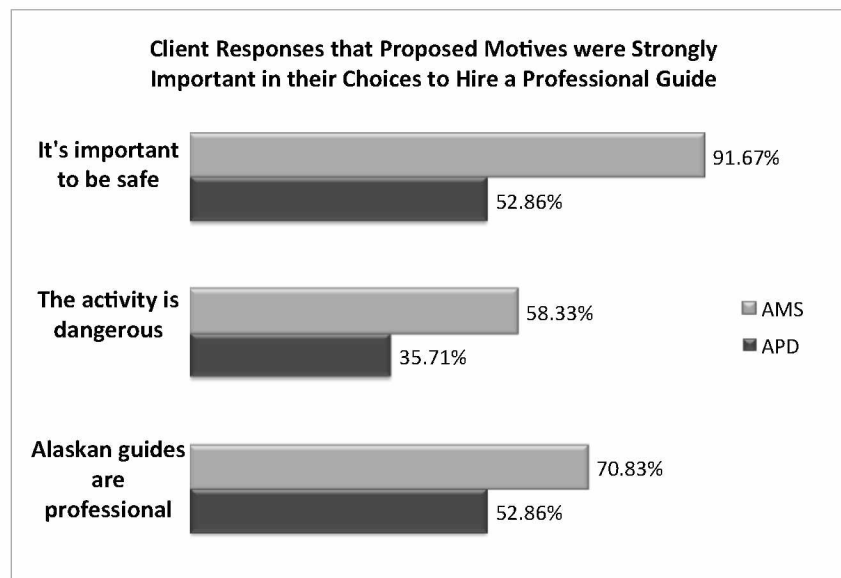


Figure 7: Client Responses that Proposed Motives were Strongly Important in their Choices to Hire a Professional Guide

For both groups, hiring Alaskan mountain guides mitigated perceived risks of the mountain environment. APD and AMS clients responded that their interest in safety was strongly important in hiring a guide. Similarly, the professionalism of Alaskan guide services was strongly important in their choice to hire a guide. The heli-ski clients of APD rated both statements significantly more important than the mountain climber

clients of AMS. This data point suggests awareness on the part of heli-skiers of risks related to avalanche terrain, and a greater awareness of mountain hazard in general.

3.4 Motivations for Travelling to Engage in Big-Mountain Tourism

Finally, the survey asked clients about their choices to travel to engage in mountain tourism. It asked them to rank four potential motivations: a) being bored at home and wanting to see other places; b) wanting to meet other people with similar interests; c) wanting and being able to afford to travel; d) wanting to see other parts of the world.

Both groups indicated that they traveled to Alaska primarily because they wanted to see other parts of the world, with 96 percent of APD clients, and 84 percent of AMS clients reporting that the travel was strongly important to them. The weakest motivation for surveyed clients was a feeling of being bored at home, with only 46 percent of APD clients, and 41 percent of AMS clients responding that this motivator was strongly important (Figure 8).

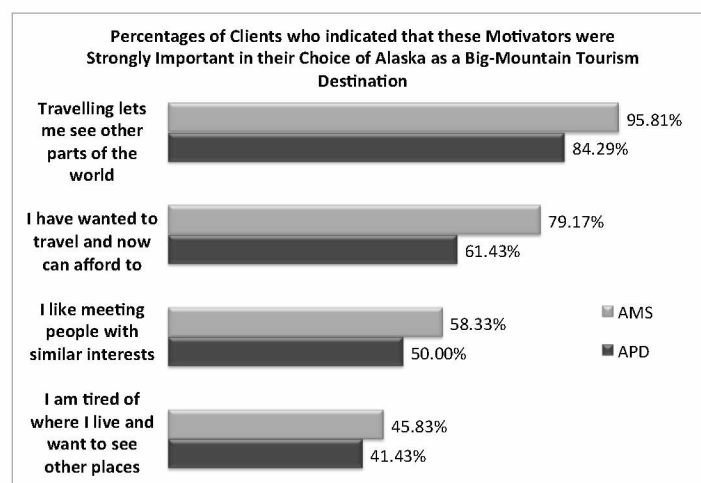


Figure 8: Percentages of Clients who indicated that these Motivators were Strongly Important in their Choice of Alaska as a Big-Mountain Tourism Destination

The skiers and climbers in this study were motivated to travel to see other parts of the world, but were not dissatisfied with where they live. As hypothesized, people travel to Alaska because it is an attractive destination. Responses indicate that the mountain tourists surveyed here traveled to Alaska owing to the unique mountaineering and big-mountain skiing opportunities the state has to offer. These are not people who are unhappy with where they live; they travel to Alaska to climb Denali, or ski the Coast Mountains of Southeast Alaska.

One important variable in both climbing and skiing is cost. Of APD heli-skiers, 79 percent said their desire to travel and being able to afford it was strongly important in their choice to come to Alaska, compared to 61 percent of AMS climbers. I attribute this difference to the very high cost of heli-skiing. A full day of the activity can easily cost an individual \$1500. Many skiers book weeklong packages and, weather permitting, will spend \$10,000 on a ten-day ski vacation to Alaska. Expedition mountain climbers spend a similar amount of money to climb Denali, but these trips last twenty-four days and that price includes food and travel in and out of the Alaska Range.

A final section of the survey queried participants about their sense of the importance of tourism to Alaska. My purpose here was to try to discern mountain tourists' perceptions of the values and benefits of this niche tourism to local communities. Adventure tourism is a significant seasonal source of community income for Juneau and Talkeetna. On the two questions in this section of the survey, I asked clients to respond on a scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree, to statements about the benefits of niche versus mass tourism to Alaska communities. Mountain clients perceive the positive effects that visiting dollars bring to small communities; 96 percent of APD clients and 90

percent of AMS clients strongly agreed that adventure tourism was beneficial to Alaska communities. Respondents had a less favorable view of the effects of mass tourism on Alaska. Only 75 percent of APD clients, and 71 percent of AMS clients strongly agreed that mass tourism was beneficial (Figure 9), though these responses still reflect an overwhelmingly positive view of mass tourism in Alaska.

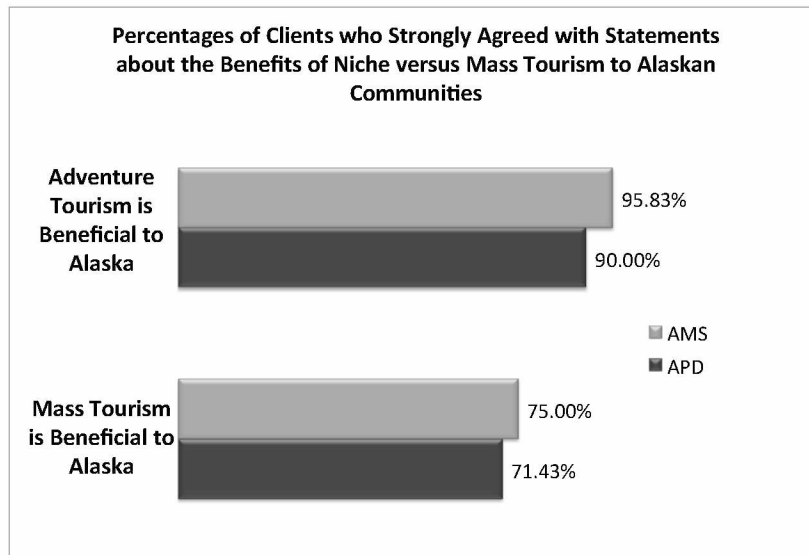


Figure 9: Percentages of Clients who Strongly Agreed with Statements about the Benefits of Niche versus Mass Tourism to Alaskan Communities

The differences in perceptions of the value to Alaska communities of various forms of tourism may be attributable to consumer bias by mountain tourists. The data indicates that climbers and skiers think adventure tourism benefits the towns that mountain tourists visit. This same group perceives less value to Alaska communities from mass tourism, even though both varieties support Alaska economically and generate significant revenue for the state and its communities. This less positive view of mass tourism may reflect their concerns about negative effects of mass tourism on small communities.

This analysis of big-mountain clients in an Alaskan context highlights some interesting and surprising results. Clients, predominantly male, earning more than \$100,000 a year, and visitors to Alaska, were most strongly motivated to participate in big-mountain culture because it occurs outside and makes them feel alive. On the other hand, they were not strongly motivated by thrill seeking or risk taking. In fact, this group hired mountain guides to manage the hazards of Alaska's mountain environs in acknowledgment of their inherent risks, believing it very important to be safety-conscious. Similarly, visiting climber clients were not concerned with Alaska's culture of rugged individualism and did not think of the place as a Last Frontier, but did believe the state was different from elsewhere, pristine, and wilderness, motivations that inspired their desire to mountaineer here. A final data point is interesting. Climbers are more goal-oriented than skiers, while skiers are more group-oriented than climbers, a distinction that underlies broader notions of cultural motives for climbing and skiing.

Chapter 4 Big-Mountain Tourism Guide Interview, Results and Analysis

I interviewed seven guides from AMS and four guides from APD. Interviews occurred from June to late November of 2013; some were in-person; most were over the phone. They ranged in time from thirty minutes to three hours, with an average of ninety minutes. The interviews consisted of three sections:

- a) Guides' motivations for working in big-mountain tourism
- b) Guides' experience and the management of big-mountain risk
- c) Changes observed over time in big-mountain tourism

4.1 Guide Demographics

Of the eleven mountain guides, ten were male and one was female. This ratio roughly approximates observed gender demographics at both companies (Figure 10).

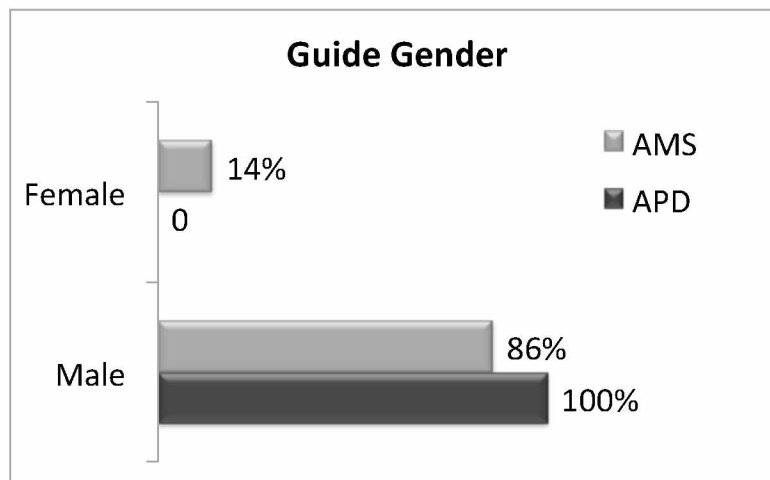


Figure 10: Guide Gender

Interviewed mountain guides ranged in age from twenty-six to forty-eight, with a mean age of thirty-five. Eight guides lived full-time in Alaska, while the remaining respondents lived in Washington, Wyoming, and Colorado. Most guides made an annual income of \$25,000 to \$50,000; three senior guides made \$50,000 to \$75,000, with one interviewee non-disclosing (Figure 11).

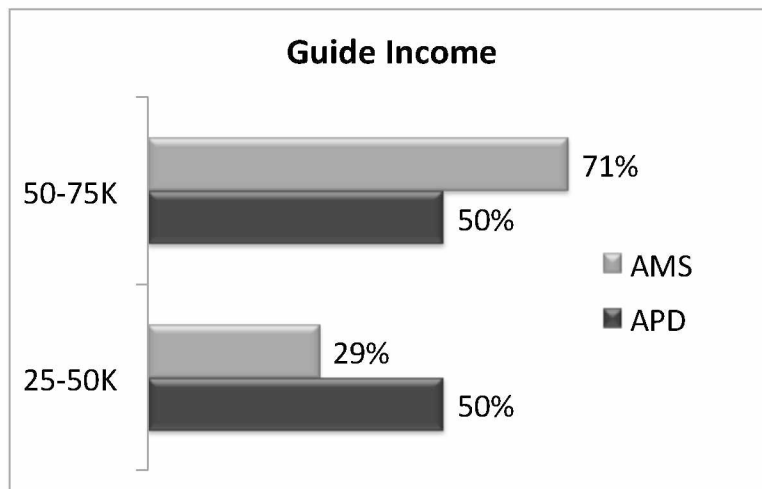


Figure 11: Guide Income

4.2 Guides' Motivations for Working in Big-Mountain Tourism

Mountain guides work in big-mountain tourism for a variety of personal and professional reasons. These included: a) a love of climbing or skiing, b) a love of wild places, c) a love of adventure and uncertainty, d) the work can create life-changing activities for participants, e) the work requires creative problem-solving and physical fitness, and f) social reasons: enjoyment of interacting with other guides and clients.

Unanimously, surveyed participants expressed a love of climbing and skiing. In most cases, both activities were a primary motivation for employment as mountain guides. Guides are outdoor lifestyle motivated, and guiding allows extensive opportunities to

work and recreate. As APD-C related: “I really love to ski. There's no other way that I could actually afford to ski as much or to get to the places that I get to ski, working in the industry.” Most guides’ mountain interest started in their youth or early teens. With encouragement from their parents, all interviewed ski guides learned to ski before the age of 8. “My dad was a die-hard ski bum,” relayed APD-D. “I grew up with the ski bug and started skiing when I was 2 years old.” Climbers, too, were often introduced to the sport by their parents. As AMS-E recalled: “Climbing, hanging out on ropes, those activities have been a big part of my development. My dad had a climbing gym at our house, and regularly took me to the outdoor crags. Later on in high school, he let me use all his gear and I went climbing every day that it wasn’t raining or snowing.” For many, the seasonality of the work contributed to their appreciation of it. As AMS-F explained: “I love guiding. It lets me work in the mountains, and then I get plenty of time off to do whatever I want.”

Interacting with wild places proved a key motivation for study participants and related well with transcendentalist and wilderness motivations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Henry David Thoreau relayed, reminiscing about the disorientating and sublime moment he experienced while climbing Katahdin in 1848, “Talk of mysteries! — Think of our life in nature, — daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, — rocks, trees, wind in our cheeks! The *solid* earth! The *actual* world! The *common sense*! *Contact! Contact! Who* are we? *where* are we?”¹ Like Thoreau, respondents reported loving the mysterious and uncontrollable qualities of wild nature. “The mountains are a safe-zone from the busyness of regular life,” explained APD-B. “I can go there, check in with myself, challenge my body and mind, and return to regular

¹ Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, ed. Joseph Moldenhauter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 70.

life feeling more calm.” Mountaineering allowed participants to live an adventurous life. For AMS-F, the climbing adventure was motivated “by curiosity. The unknown captivates me.” The motivation to spend time in the mountains began as a curiosity for many. But, with repeated experience, guides came to associate mountain adventures with happiness and peacefulness.

The sport and profession demand critical thinking and creative problem solving. As APD-B noted:

I'm intrinsically a curious and creative person: that's part of me. Guiding has provided a unique opportunity to go to locations that I might not have otherwise spent the money to go. I guess that I was born 100 years too late to be a cowboy in the Wild West. The mountains of Alaska represent some of the last untamed places on the planet we can go to. I can't imagine living anywhere else.

Other guides and clients shared APD-B's sense that Alaska was a place away, different, pristine, and untouched.

Mountain guiding is not a high paying profession. But, it allows participants to work outside, and with like-minded people. As AMS-G related:

I've never been someone that works a job just for money, where I don't actually enjoy the job itself. When guiding, I identify the people that are going to benefit from the trip, who are participating for the same reasons that I am, to be outside and in the mountains. I focus on sharing the mountains, and don't worry about the paycheck.

Deriving satisfaction from creating empowering experiences for clients strongly motivated mountain guides. Climbing and skiing had been personally significant in all

interviewed guides' lives. By sharing the mountain environment with clients, guides felt they were giving back. AMS-B went so far as to say: "Being outdoors, climbing, it saved me. I was on a crash course, and guiding allowed me to focus and do something positive with my life." The guide continued, noting that: "Interacting with people, the leadership and group dynamics involved in that, and the decision-making and science, determining snow safety, weather, when to travel, I love those challenges. I love teaching people how to safely move around in the mountains.

Mountain guiding requires creative problem solving and physical fitness. The challenges of managing group dynamics in inclement environmental conditions, while making risk management and route finding decisions about where to climb or ski, provide motivation and satisfaction to mountain guides. "I like a job that is athletic and brainy," relayed AMS-A. "Guiding is a combination of brain and brawn. I have to be strong enough to lead my group, regardless of how I feel. And I have to be smart enough to read my group, to stop and rest when they're tired, then motivate and inspire them to move again."

The diversity of terrain in which mountain professionals work presents challenges and requires problem solving that guides enjoy. On Denali, the first third of the expedition is low-angle glacier travel with risk of crevasse fall. Managing that risk requires specific rope spacing, coaching on appropriate rope tension, and deliberate travel techniques. Once climbers reach the Advanced Base Camp on the West Buttress, guides transition to managing the risk that clients will fall down steep and exposed slopes. This requires that guides set tighter rope spacing, teach clients deliberate crampon and ice axe use, and place anchors on the slope to protect clients from falling. AMS-A continued, "I

love the challenge of decision-making, applying the most appropriate technique to a problem in the mountains.” A major challenge in mountain guiding is the application of soft skills like judgment, communication, and decision-making. Guides can never take a break from their responsibility for the safety of their clients. The job requires around-the-clock attention to travel and camping considerations, and the leadership and composure to work with a variety of personalities and needs.

A final core motivation for guides to work in the big mountain profession was the social interactions that come with the job. For safety and success, climbing and skiing require partnership and shared group responsibility. Guides appreciate their small society of like-minded professionals, and also enjoy sharing the mountains with clients. As AMS-D related: “When I got the job at AMS, the family atmosphere of the company made me feel like I was part of a community, and I’ve worked here ever since. I love working in the mountains with other professionals, most of whom are my friends of many years.” The guide went on to describe his happiness at regular, but impromptu international reunions with his peers, as guides often travel the world to work in mountain ranges according to their climbing season.

For ski guides, too, the social experience of mountain culture is significant. As APD-B noted: “When I’ve been traveling with only my group for a while, my favorite thing is to run into other ski parties. I love to see my friends in the backcountry and chances are, if they’re backcountry skiing around here [Alaska], I know at least one of them.” Guides from both AMS and APD expressed appreciation of the tight-knit guiding community. For many, valued friendships had developed with fellow guides while

working together in the mountains. AMS-F, a senior guide at AMS, liked guiding in the Alaska Range because it was his best opportunity to see friends from all over the world.

Mountain guides were motivated to participate in the mountain tourism industry because of their love of the activity itself, of wild places, and of a lifestyle that seasonal employment allowed. As AMS-B related: “I was drawn to wilderness areas. Mountains just happened to be in wilderness areas. All the ropes and climbing steeper stuff, that’s an extension of being in the outdoors. I didn’t get into climbing for a thrill ride.” Guides enjoyed sharing the mountains with clients, and the athleticism and problem solving required by the work. And finally, mountain guides appreciated their profession because of its small-knit community, and were motivated to participate because of the social nature of the work.

4.3 Guides’ Experience and the Management of Big-Mountain Risk

Guides believed clients hired them to manage mountain risks and offer leadership and psychological support. The mountain guides I interviewed stressed the importance of experience, defined here as mountain guide training and years participating in high consequence decision-making, as the most important factor in the management of mountain risk.

The length of mountain guiding experience among interviewees varied, but was extensive. Only one interviewed guide had worked in the industry for less than a decade, and most had guided for multiple decades. Cumulative participation *on a personal level* with mountaineering or skiing equaled 258 years, with an average participation of 23.5 years per guide. Interviewees had a combined *professional participation*, working as a

mountain guide or in the outdoor industry as a trip leader, of 133 years, with an average participation of 12 years.

In addition to field experience, guides believed continuing education in evolving outdoor industry safety standards, third party professional instruction, and operation level in-house workshops were critical for mountain safety. Guides at AMS and APD held that each operation provided adequate operational risk management; they stressed that company organization was very important for guide and client safety.

The primary responsibility of mountain guiding is the minimization of risks inherent to mountaineering and big-mountain skiing. To learn mountain risk management, apprentice guides need a quality mentorship with an experienced professional, someone with years of leadership experience making decisions in high-consequence terrain. Mentorship is followed by years of indirect supervision and feedback. As AMS-D explained:

I make sure my assistant guides understand that communication is number one. I tell guides to make recommendations that their clients drink water, wear proper insulation. Cold injury prevention requires communication with clients; we prevent the outcome, rather than treat it. It can take years for apprentice guides to get comfortable enough to set clients up for success.

Mountain risk management relies on a combination of identifying hazards and avoiding them, and educating clients to understand safety decisions. AMS-D continued: “It takes experience and confidence to tell clients who are excited to travel that we’re not moving today, or we’re turning around on summit day because of weather or changing conditions.”

Before the trip, both AMS and APD required each client to send in a current medical history form and a resume of past ascents or descents. This pre-trip information helped guides plan for the safety of their clients. Once in the field, guides began each day of their expedition or ski outing with a briefing designed to coordinate safe movement expectations, review trip objectives, and answer client questions. Guides carried first aid kits, radios, and GPS units. These tools allowed groups to communicate with each other and passing aircraft, to check the weather, and send out current route information. Guides protected their clients from mountain hazards by leading them through high exposure areas and requiring that they use safety equipment like helmets, and avalanche companion rescue equipment, specifically a transceiver, shovel, and probe.

For skiers and climbers, primary mountain risks included clients falling down slopes or into crevasses, or objects like rock, snow, ice, or other climbers falling from above. As APD-C noted: “There's not that much you can do except try to impress upon people that if they get hurt in the field it's a really serious situation.” And as AMS- E explained:

The best way I have found to gain buy-in is to teach my clients about the mountain environment, the risks. I do this early in the trip and continue up to summit day. That way, if the weather turns sour, I've got a group of people who are already thinking about turning around, making camp, etc. I try to take my clients and turn them into climbers!

The primary method that guides used to manage exposure in avalanche terrain was testing while in the field. As APD-C explained: “When I show up in a new place, I start by digging a snow pit to assess stability, and try to have the guides I am working

with also dig, but on different aspects of the cardinal rose.² That way, we know if layers in the snowpack are consistent or change from sun affected aspects to those that are north facing.” If possible, guides like to assess client ability by beginning the expedition or ski outing on more gentle terrain. As the outing progresses, guides work with clients on more challenging terrain, informed by their assessment of client ability. As APD-C continued: “I prefer to place people on runs where if they fall, they won’t fall off a cliff, but rather down the run and then on to a big apron. The same applies for avalanches, too. I really worry about avalanches more than anything else; they’re why people usually die heli-skiing.”

Heli-skiing poses unique mountain risk management challenges. The helicopter lets guides access a variety of terrain quickly, often skiing eight to twelve runs in a day. Unlike backcountry skiing, where ski mountaineers climb a mountain and ski down, heli-skiers start from the top. The risk of snowpack variability and avalanche is much higher, and big-mountain heli-skiing often sends guides and clients through different temperatures and types of snow, with no prior knowledge of snowpack at different elevations. As APD- D noted:

We have our feelings about the snow pack, and we try to manage the risks of avalanche by snow stability tests, and field observations shared via radio, but guides still die, and not necessarily because they didn’t perform to the expected standard: it’s just really hard. The scary questions about snow stability are deep in the snowpack and vary from place to place.

² The cardinal rose refers to sixteen directions inferred with circle geometry and used for orientation to the earth’s magnetic north pole. North, at the top of the circle, is 0/360 degrees; East, at the right of the circle, is 90 degrees; South, at the bottom of the circle, is 180 degrees; and West, at the left of the circle, is 270 degrees. The four cardinal directions can be split twice more, creating four and eight additional orienting points, NE, SE, SW, NW; and NNE, ENE, SSE, SSW, WSW, WNW, NNW. When split sixteen ways, the cardinal directions each capture 22.5 degrees of the 360-degree circle.

Understanding snowpack takes years of experience, and even experts who work in high-angle snow terrain occasionally die in avalanches.

If an accident occurs in the field, guides initially manage the incident with the resources of their group. Heli-ski guides keep a backboard, splinting materials, oxygen, and a trauma kit in their helicopter. In the event of a serious accident, a client can be flown to emergency care in a matter of hours. Mountaineering guides equip their base camps with similar first aid equipment, but have limited access to that equipment once an expedition moves up the mountain. Similarly, mountaineering guides have less access to mechanized rescue. In the Alaska Range, even while equipped with state-of-the-art communication devices like satellite phones and air-to-ground radios, guides are entirely dependent on good weather to evacuate an injured or sick client. This process can take days, or in extreme cases, weeks.

Guides believed that experience was the only way to learn about and effectively manage the inherent risks of mountaineering and big mountain skiing. Guides gain experience through personal outings, and through mentorship opportunities with senior guides. Additionally, guides cited the mastery of hard and soft skills that enable client safety education, and conservative decision making that minimizes client exposure to high consequence terrain as necessary components for risk management while mountain guiding.

4.4 Changes Observed Over Time in Big-Mountain Tourism

Over the course of their careers, mountain guides observed that the mountain tourism industry changed dramatically, most noticeably with increased participation by

the general population in big mountain skiing and climbing. The changes interviewees noted fall into four categories.

a) The proliferation of media, such as films, books, and magazines that focus on skiing and climbing contributed to broader public exposure, making big-mountain climbing and skiing less marginal and more mainstream. Evolving equipment made skiing and climbing easier, allowing for broader access and participation, and allowing for greater likelihood of success amongst clients and amateurs. Similarly, guides reported that clientele were less experienced.

b) Alaska guides believed the big-mountain environment was self-regulating, but noted an industry-wide trend toward required certification for guides in the United States.

c) The process to become a mountain guide changed. In the past, climbers with significant experience were offered guiding positions based on their resumes and relationships with the local big-mountain community. With the popularization of mountain tourism and increased need for guides, apprentice guides now entered the profession through mentor or internship programs, and began with very little mountain experience.

d) Guides expressed reservations about the cost of participation in big-mountain tourism, and concern over increased exposure to legal liability with less prepared clientele.

4.4.1 Increases in Popularity led to Equipment Advances and Changes in Clients

Interviewed guides speculated that the popularization of big-mountain tourism owed to an explosion of media attention on adventure travel, survival, climbing, and

skiing. This trend paralleled the increased popularity of the Seven Summit sequence, a popular quest to climb the highest peak on each continent.

In the 1990s, Alaska heli-skiing was reserved solely for expert skiers. Through the efforts of filmmakers like Teton Gravity Research, a national audience watched as professional skiers and snowboarders descended the steep, snow-laden mountains of Valdez, Haines, and Juneau. Familiarity with Alaska's big-mountain skiing terrain helped brand the region a ski destination. APD-D reported: "The biggest change I've seen in the past five or six years has been active marketing by the ski industry around backcountry skiing. Travelling to Alaska to heli-ski is now an accepted norm. I think more people feel like it is within their comfort zone, and think of Alaska as ski vacation destination." In 1990, Alaska had no heli-ski operations. The state now has fourteen heli-ski operators spread across coastal Alaska.

Mountaineering was also more mainstream. The high mountain industry grew steadily since the late 1990s. As AMS-E related: "The 1996 Everest disaster, as chronicled by Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*, put expedition climbing on everyone's radar. I thought the '96 disaster would chase people away, but suddenly it became a goal for people to go climb the Seven Summits, especially Everest." Since the early 2000s, guides noted an increasing popularity in the Seven Summit Circuit. AMS- E continued: "I've guided on all seven continents, and even during the 2007 recession, our client numbers were increasing. Commercial mountain guiding is growing so fast. I think the Seven Summit circuit is going to continue to grow."

Yet, for companies like AMS, which teaches clients outdoor education and guides them on a variety of mountains in the Alaska Range, the popularity of the Seven Summit model was alienating. According to AMS-B:

We're into people learning how to climb mountains for a lifetime of climbing mountains, not just until they've knocked off the Seven Summits. Mountaineering is not trophy hunting. The Seven Summits market attracts people with zero past interest in climbing, no foundation in wilderness travel, and no desire to pursue mountaineering beyond the Seven Summits. I have a hard time relating to that.

Guides agreed that advances in equipment technology designed for big-mountain skiing and climbing made the sport more accessible to client participants. One of the most tangible changes was the evolution of ski equipment. The use of skis as travel tools is ancient. And, as tools for the sport of alpinism, skis have been used within Western European culture for three hundred fifty years. But, in the last fifteen years, ski geometry has radically changed. As APD-B noted: "The industry has gone from skinny-skis with rudimentary boots, technology that hasn't changed much in centuries, to custom-fit boots, and multidimensional, varying width skis with flotation rocker. I think the new gear is allowing beginner-intermediate people to ski in advanced terrain." More user-friendly equipment has not minimized the hazards of the mountain environment. Instead, guides noticed more inexperienced backcountry users in technical and exposed mountain terrain, a worrisome development.

The big-mountain clientele changed with the rise in popularity of the culture. Climbers and skiers today are less skilled than in the past. Similarly, clients are less prepared mentally and physically for the mountain environment. According to AMS-E:

Twenty to thirty years ago, all the clientele were climbers. If you look at American entrepreneur Dick Bass, the first person to be "guided" up Everest and reach all Seven Summits, it was technically as a client, but he climbed everything on his own and he carried his own loads. Bass was much more of a climber and a team member than we see today.

Guides reported that mountain climbing and skiing had gained in popularity as a result of marketing. According to AMS-E:

Now, everyone knows that climbing exists. There are magazines and movies about mountaineering. Mainstream people see media portrayals of extreme sport and want to dabble in it. And all the marketing from the Seven Summit companies, or from Recreation Equipment Incorporated (REI), it has turned mountain culture into big business.

The guide continued: "People don't need to be super tough, avid outdoor folks anymore. It's almost like you can sign up and get the experience as you go. That is a big change."

4.4.2 Changing Certification Requirements

Guides reported that the big-mountain tourism industry was moving toward safety standardization, a trend driven by the liability insurance that guiding businesses must hold to gain public land use permits. A byproduct of this process was an increasing trend in the United States that mountain guides hold nationally and internationally recognized certifications. The American Mountain Guide Association and the Heli-Ski US Association are professional groups that offer a variety of trainings that lead toward guide certification.

The guides I interviewed were mountain professionals with an average twelve years guiding experience. All expressed concerns with the new certification requirements, believing them to be expensive, and less effective than in-house training and operational self-regulation, the current standards for employment as mountain guides. As AMS-D explained:

To actually get a certification, that doesn't really mean much. AMS wants to see a climbing resume. Past experience on Denali. An ascent or two in Yosemite of El Capitan or routes in the Grand Tetons. A ski traverse across the Brooks Range.

Guides don't get qualified to work in Alaska by taking a class and passing a test.

The certifying organizations don't even guide here!

Despite these reservations, AMS-D recommended that guides entering the profession move through certification, for employment security. He believed that the National Park Service and other federal land managers would soon require that guides hold national certification, a major change to the profession.

4.4.3 Changing Processes for Becoming a Guide

Guides today are more likely to be working in the industry following completion of a certification program. When the senior guides at AMS and APD began work in the mountain tourism industry, all guides were experienced climbers or skiers. To be an alpinist was counter cultural. Guides lived out of their cars, out of dumpsters, or camped illegally, living almost for free. When AMS-D began guiding, aspiring guides did not apply for a guiding position until the guides of the local mountaineering company knew the individual as a climber. Guides would see aspiring guides out climbing, developing

their climbing resumes and gaining experience. If the guide service thought an aspirant's resume was strong, and knew the guide as a quality person and safe in the mountains, then it would accept the applicant as an apprentice. Senior guides trained apprentices, who initially worked for free. The apprenticeship lasted for years, and created strong, well-qualified and experienced mountain guides.

The popularization of big-mountain tourism increased demand for mountain guides. To help meet demand, AMS created an internship program with Alaska Pacific University and more recently the University of Alaska Southeast. Students who intern with AMS learn mountaineering skills through the university, a modern version of the apprenticeship required of aspirant guides a generation ago. Another avenue for entering the profession was through trainings with the American Mountain Guide Association. Students learn technical skills and soft skills, but often lack climbing experience. As AMS-D reported:

It's my impression that guides coming into the trade now think working in the mountains is a fun, outdoor job. Yes, it can be. But, this work is not carefree. We work with people in small groups in stressful situations. If I make a mistake, people will get hurt, or worst case, killed. A lot of aspiring guides don't understand the seriousness of this work. I think this disconnect is from a lack of actual climbing experience.

4.4.4 Reservations about Changes to Big-Mountain Tourism

Guides expressed two primary reservations about mountain tourism changes. Specifically, the rising costs of big-mountain tourism, increases in fuel for helicopters

and ski planes, etc., limited participation and were compounded by the increased popularity and declining skill levels of clientele, which exposed guides to greater legal liability.

Guides universally expressed concern with the rising costs for client participation. According to AMS-A:

Even with better gear, and more people in the mountains, the demographics I want to work with can't afford to hire me. I volunteer my time for school groups, and encourage my friends to do the same. If costs keep going up, and I am certain they will, I might stop mountain guiding, or instead find work in outdoor education. I want to empower people by spending time with them outdoors, not just serve a leisure-class.

Guides felt similarly that legal liability was a larger concern than in the past. According to APD-A: "I don't know what is driving it, but we keep an attorney on retainer because of our concern of getting sued. I had a client ski down behind me three seasons ago, after I had told him to wait. The skier fell and seriously injured himself, and if he had followed my instructions, the accident likely wouldn't have happened." Now, the guiding company regularly gets negative correspondence from the skier's spouse, who believed the guide was negligent in his communication of mountain hazards. Guides believed that the decrease in client ability and understanding of the mountain environment increased their risk of a lawsuit.

In short, big-mountain guides in Alaska feel called to *be* in the high mountains. As a group, they make far less than clients, are predominantly male with some noteworthy exceptions, and began climbing or skiing when most children learn to walk.

Like their clients, guides cited their love of being outside doing their chosen sport as a primary motivation for big-mountain employment. Unlike clients, guides from Alaska, and guides from elsewhere who guide here, in many cases believed their work was occurring on a modern-day frontier, and thought of themselves as actors in a broader Alaskan mythos.

And, unlike clients, guides were at times uncomfortable with their participation in the commercialization and popularization of mountain culture. Surprisingly, guides most enjoyed working with their friends and colleagues in the mountain community, citing reasons of esprit de corps. Similarly, sharing the mountains with clients or students was regularly mentioned as a continued motivation for career mountain guides. In both cases, the camaraderie developed in the small group setting made friendships and social connections that transcended the expedition setting, relating well to notions of psychological wellness attained through shared responsibility and common goals.

Chapter 5 Big-Mountain Tourism in the Alaska Context, Discussion

As a lifelong Alaskan who guides professionally, I was interested in whether and to what degree Alaska big mountain clients and guides identify with the region's environment and culture. I also sought perspectives on the benefits of big-mountain tourism, and tourism in general, to Alaska communities. This section discusses perspectives on Alaska big-mountain tourism in relation to five themes that represent a synthesis of data from the client survey and guide interview:

- a) People travel to Alaska because it is an adventure destination, one they associate with wild nature.
- b) Participating in big-mountain tourism in Alaska captures a demand not only for participating in the sport itself, but for participating in this activity in a specific location that has a uniquely inspiring landscape and culture.
- c) Clients participating in big-mountain culture place great value on the natural landscape and the activities of outdoor adventure and accept the risks of big mountain climbing and skiing because they identify a reward from the activity that justifies the risk, but they mediate the risks of mountain climbing and skiing by hiring professional mountain guides.
- d) Mountain guiding, the guiding of big mountain climbs or ski descents, is a form of niche tourism, and commercializes adventure.
- e) Big-mountain and mass tourism are beneficial for Alaskan communities.

5.1 Alaska, Destination for Adventure and Wild Nature

Alaska's unique landscape clearly motivated study participants, who traveled here for the region's exceptional and adventurous mountaineering and big-mountain alpine skiing. Clients and guides alike perceived Alaska as an adventure destination, choosing to climb and work here because of the region's exceptional geography and close-knit mountain community. The survey data indicated that clients and guides were motivated to participate in niche big-mountain tourism because it occurred outside, and in their participation they felt enlivened. Climbing and skiing in the "wild" Alaska big-mountain setting was a primary motive for study participants and offered rejuvenating self-reflection and sublime experience.

Surveyed clients were equivocal about Alaska as a last frontier. Guides, on the other hand, saw themselves as cultural participants in more than the American dirtbag climbing culture of the 1960s, regularly citing frontier romance-type motivations for employment in Alaska's big-mountain tourism. Like the "arctic individualism" Bob Marshall observed in 1930s-era Wiseman, mountain guides believed the harsh conditions of Alaska mountaineering fostered independence, enabling a freedom of thought and action that created contentment. Guides expressed ideas that placed their work in Gerald Nash's frontier master narrative, casting Alaska a new "West of the imagination." As AMS-C, a long time Alaskan observed, "Alaska is attractive because people associate it with adventure, a frontier of mountaineering in North America. It's an obsessive unknown and different; people want to climb here because of the mystique of the place." These beliefs seem rooted in the self-regulating nature of Alaska big-mountain tourism, and in cultural notions of Alaska as a frontier and exceptional wilderness.

5.2 Alaska Big-Mountain Tourism, a Uniquely Inspiring Landscape and Culture

The challenges of big-mountain tourism in Alaska were considered unique and inspired a closely-knit mountain community composed of hard working guides, adventurous clients, and highly skilled non-guided climbers. Unusually challenging because of inclement weather, extreme cold, high elevation, and remoteness, the practical realities of Alaska mountaineering were offset by the hardiness and self-reliance of Alaskan climbers, whose resiliency inspired visiting climbers. Guide APD-A believed the mountain culture in Alaska was a draw for clients, and for guides from elsewhere. “The Alaska mystique motivates my participation. When I guide here, I’m walking in the footsteps of the greatest skiers in the history of the sport. And the skiing, when it’s good, is the best in the world.”

The combination of geographic significance and condition-dependent success added to the allure of Alaska mountaineering. Even with low summit success, the exceptional mountaineering and skiing of the Alaska and Coast Ranges motivated a core group of big-mountain participants to return year after year. According to AMS-B: “The success rate on Denali is 50 percent. I’ve had return clients who didn’t summit three years in a row. And hotshot friends from Switzerland who misjudged Denali’s extreme cold and had to turn around on summit day.” Stories of weather causing delays for climbing and skiing were common amongst clients and guides, but seemed to add an allure to mountaineering in such an extreme place.

The remote location of coastal skiing and Alaska Range climbing contributed to the region’s yearly draw. Guides traveled to the Coast Range in March to ski guide. In May, some transitioned to mountain guiding in the Alaska Range. According to APD-B:

“Over the course of the last decade, I’ve worked with guides and clients from all over the world. When I am in Alaska, I regularly see friends, people I don’t see outside of the Alaska climbing scene.” Contributors regularly cited their appreciation of the far north’s strong and close-knit climbing community, and the region’s exceptional landscape, as motivating factors for participation in Alaska big-mountain tourism.

5.3 Mountain Adventure, Risk Acceptance and Management, with Guide as Facilitator

Several aspects of the big-mountain environment in Alaska differ from such environments in other places. For example, climbs in most North American mountaineering destinations take two to four days to complete. The remote nature and large scale of Alaska climbing sometimes requires expeditions with multi-week timelines. Participants mountaineer in a much larger area, with fewer resources that are less developed than in the contiguous states; they create their own avalanche forecasts, and must rely on less precise weather information from others. As APD-D related:

In other parts of the country, ski guides use an avalanche forecast that is updated daily by a professional. Here, I make my own forecast from weather maps and on the ground observations. There’s less information about places, and far more on the spot decision-making and analysis by guides. We operate with only a fraction of the information of guide services down south, but do it safely, and pride ourselves on that.

Work on public lands in adventure tourism outside of Alaska requires national safety certification, guide-school type qualifications that refine technical and movement skill in various alpine environments. Big-mountain tourism in Alaska predates industry

regulation. Alaskan guides believe their industry is self-regulating, and that national certifications do not relate to the Alaska multi-week expedition format. AMS-B, a longtime guide in the Alaska Range and on high mountains around the world, explained why national certification programs were inadequate for Alaska conditions:

No one teaches clients how to build igloos anymore. In Alaska you need to be able to build an igloo that's big enough for three people in less than two hours. Put that on the American Mountain Guide exam and see how many people pass. Nobody would! Anything to do with camping is not considered climbing, and not part of the certification. And now, when rocks fall, people just turn around and run away.

Outside operations are granted land-use permits by land managers based on their guiding experience, safety record, and relationship with the land manager, but not on conditions that guides in Alaska regularly encounter or expertise they must have.

The scale and remoteness of Alaska's mountains require participants to be versatile at assessing and adapting to a variety of mountain conditions and weather patterns. Alaska mountain guides thrive with this level of responsibility. "If I only guided one mountain I wouldn't have lasted this long," relayed AMS-A. "The fact that I work in an incredibly challenging mountain range, and that I get to decide where and what I'm going to do with every trip keeps me excited. That level of autonomy doesn't exist most places in the big-mountain tourism world. I get to pick the glacier, pick the climb, maybe it has been climbed before, maybe not!"

Alaskan mountain guides are talented climbers and skiers who love wilderness and highly value their work. As Alaskan guide AMS-E noted:

Alpinism as a sport is not my interest. It used to be; I grew up climbing and skiing in and around Anchorage. But, what is interesting to me, especially now in my thirties, is how mountain guiding has allowed me to share wild Alaskan mountains with a variety of people. Sometimes I step back and wonder at how lucky I am to have this job!

One common misperception of mountaineering is that it is exceptionally dangerous. Although climbing and skiing in the big mountains of Alaska have significant inherent risks, they are identifiable and careers are built around managing them. Mountain guides are risk managers, environmental stewards, outdoor educators, and small group leaders. The best guides are knowledgeable, experienced, and respectful, and calmly manage risks in the mountains. “When a client hires a guide service, they are still getting a big adventure,” AMS-D explained. “Most clients do not have the skills to plan a climbing expedition. They don’t have exposure to the ins and outs of successful planning, nor the hard skills to safely navigate the mountain environment. They hire us to provide expedition and mountain knowledge. The climbing is basic for us, but what they experience is very adventurous.”

The unknowns of the mountain environment contribute to client perceptions that participation is dangerous. Mountain guides, however, are trained to identify and manage the dangerous parts of the mountain environment, a familiarity that allows guides to feel comfortable in high-consequence terrain, and enable clients to have a peak mountain experience. “Mountain guiding exposes clients to extremes,” observed AMS-F. “In Alaska, the obvious extreme on expeditions is their remoteness. And, expedition climbing induces a psychological extreme. It evokes aesthetics inspired by being in wild,

high places. It's a combination of beauty and intensity mixed with challenge and hardship."

Sometimes the high-consequence mountain environment does prove lethal. For APD-C, a retired professional extreme skier, the loss of a friend in an avalanche changed his risk-to-reward threshold. He changed careers, deciding to guide Alaska's mountains and continue to backcountry ski with friends, but ski more conservatively. The guide reflected:

This powder euphoria, it kills people. The only rule in extreme skiing is stay alive! I am attracted to dangerous things, and skiing took me as close to the edge as I've been. But after surviving losing my best friend, I decided to step it back and focus on sharing the mountains. Heli-skiing in Alaska is a pinnacle—skiing here is often compared to surfing on Hawaii's North Shore. This is the best in the world.

5.4 Big-Mountain Guiding as Niche Tourism, it Commercializes Adventure

A cottage industry in Alaska, big-mountain climbing and skiing is a niche form of adventure tourism, according to both clients and guides. APD-D stated emphatically:

Mountain guiding is niche tourism. It involves only a small number of people, and brings employment and career opportunities to communities. It is a great resource for locals who might want to ski or climb beyond their comfort zone. If the industry didn't exist, the guides wouldn't be around, and locals would have less exposure or opportunity for guided mountaineering.

Other guides agreed.

A few senior guides participated in big-mountain tourism in the 1980s when interest in climbing Denali and other peaks in the Alaska Range began to gain popularity. AMS-F, who moved to Talkeetna as young adult, commented that guided climbing in the Alaska Range was a significant part of her understanding of the place. The guiding season is short, only about three months long, from late April to early July, but the income she earned from guiding allowed her to work part time the rest of the year.

I look at Denali, Foraker, and Hunter on every clear day, and that view grounds me in the Talkeetna landscape. This place defines niche guiding. Since I moved here, seeing climbers around town has only increased my passion in mountaineering. We are part of a larger climbing community. I love that I can work as a mountain guide in the mountains of my home.

An evolving public awareness of heli-ski potential in Alaska's coastal mountains, combined with a stable snowpack, led to the region's redefinition as a ski destination in the 1990s. As in the Alaska Range, the guiding season is a short one, running from February to mid-April. For APD-B, a ski guide in Haines and Juneau, ski guiding covers his winter expenses, and allows him to ski Alaska's big-mountain lines. As the guide explained, "there was one heli-ski operator in Haines in 2000. Now there are three operations, and fourteen across the state. I am fortunate and grew up heli-skiing with mentors who shared their skills and love of the mountains." The guide values the group experience and loves sharing his big-mountain home with visiting skiers.

Guides agreed that mountain guiding, at least partially, commercializes adventure. Yet, many expressed dissatisfaction with the popularization and commercialization of big-mountain tourism, in Alaska, and around the globe. Guiding makes a commodity out

of the climbing experience. Although clients, as Dean MacCannell argued, are seeking authentic experiences to fill a void left by certain lackluster aspects of modernity,¹ the resulting popularization of mountain culture has left guides and non-commercial climbers alike alienated by the increased numbers of people participating in their sport. These sentiments are nothing new. Noted Yosemite first ascent ace Royal Robbins observed in *Basic Rockcraft*, that “A simple equation exists between freedom and numbers: the more people the less freedom. If we are to retain the beauties of the sport, the fine edge, the challenge, we must consider our style of climbing.”² Robbins retired from rock climbing in the 1970s, in part because of an increase in popularity and crowds at the crags. Robbins’ call for a return to clean style reflects a tension in big-mountain tourism: guides often feel that clients are not real climbers, and their lack of expertise and need for guidance, although it offers guides employment on the landscape they love, delegitimizes the self-reliant ethos of mountain climbing.

Mountaineering and outdoor education focus on teaching and inspiring participants to venture into the mountains on their own. Mountain guiding is a different model, and guides understand their role as risk manager and adventure facilitator. Without a client base, mountain tourism would not exist, but for many guides, taking into the field people who lack the appropriate training or attitude for success feels almost unethical. “I believe in fair means,” relayed AMS-G, “and don't like taking people up Denali who don't really belong there, due to a lack of fitness or mental fortitude. I think helicopters make big mountain terrain too accessible. Heli-skiing puts people into places they are probably physically incapable of getting to on their own.” Many other guides

¹ MacCannell, 105.

² Royal Robbins, *Basic Rockcraft* (Glendale: La Siesta Press, 1971), 66.

expressed reservations about the selling adventure to clients who seek experiences for which they lack appropriate skills.

The popularization of big-mountain tourism has intensified use of specific mountain regions, jeopardizing their vulnerable ecologies. The Seven Summits market attracts big-mountain tourism to each of the continents' highest mountains. Most of these peaks are located in less developed countries on or near the Equator. Even with decades of climber use, the Seven Summits still only have limited infrastructure to support the thousands of people who flood to each continent's highest mountain during the short climbing season.

AMS-B offered an example of some of the negative effects big-mountain tourism can have on the environment. On Argentina's Aconcagua, the 6,900-meter high point in South America, piles of human feces surround the various campsites, and hygiene is a major concern.

I did fourteen trips on Aconcagua and it just got worse and worse, it was disgusting. People aren't told to do anything, and a lot of people had absolutely no understanding of hygiene. Climbers shit next to the snow that we use for water. They don't bag their toilet paper, and they can't burn it because it is windy. The toilet paper ends up in the drinking water. Denali is a national park, it's protected and I am glad it is protected; otherwise you would have hotdog stands at base camp.

Like AMS-B, other guides had strong reservations about mountain tourism's ecological impacts, its commercialization, and its popularization, which had encouraged summiting mountains as an achievement, rather than a wilderness experience.

With increasing commercialization of big-mountain tourism worldwide, guides expressed their satisfaction at working in the high mountains of Alaska. APD-B commented: “Skiing here, sharing the adventure of this place, it’s a privilege. Yes, we’re selling an adventure, but in my opinion, this is money well spent.” AMS-B stressed the environmental soundness of adventure tourism in Alaska: “Working here, we don’t make a lot of money, but we make a big impact. I am an environmentalist. I want to share the mountains with other people, and then leave them as I found them. We can do that in Alaska.”

According to APD-B and AMS-B, the popularization of mountain guiding in Alaska has been positive. Clients share in the adventure and wilderness qualities of skiing and climbing Alaska’s high mountains, and operations maintain strict environmental regulations. Guides view international mountain guiding less favorably, noting that mountain tourism disproportionally employs foreign mountain guides, and they stress the insufficient infrastructure and fragile alpine environments of mountain destinations, especially in the developing world.

5.5 Niche Big-Mountain and Mass Tourism are Positive for Alaska

Talkeetna and Juneau benefit economically from big-mountain tourism. During the mountaineering season, climbers and skiers are colorful fixtures in the community who eat at local restaurants and stay at hotels. Beyond the economic benefits, big-mountain tourism contributes to the identity of Talkeetna and Juneau. “On KTNA, the local Talkeetna radio station,” noted AMS-A:

They still read the mountain weather forecast every day of the climbing season.

Climbers don't listen to KTNA anymore. We bring MP3 players, and get National Weather Service forecasts from basecamp. So I told KTNA they didn't need to put the mountain weather on the radio anymore. The station responded that the Talkeetna community likes to know what the weather is doing for climbers on the mountain. Local people feel connected to the mountain climbers, and because Talkeetna is a hub for it, they also feel distinct, like the climbers make the place unique.

Similarly, heli-skiing has shaped Juneau's community identity. "Big-mountain skiing makes Juneau attractive to adventure-minded tourists and university students," relayed APD-D. "Diversity is a good thing for an isolated community like ours. Having heli-ski clients in town from all over the world makes Juneau more cosmopolitan," enlivening the community. The guide continued, noting that: "Tourism creates jobs for local mountain people. We get paid to lead activities that empower participants, and bring those positive experiences back to our homes."

The economic impacts of AMS and APD on the Talkeetna and Juneau economies are significant. "The amount of money visiting climbers are pumping into Talkeetna is not huge," noted AMS-D. "But it does drive locals to participate in mountain culture; it's part of the identity here. On the other hand, the money AMS pours into the community is huge! Alaska Mountaineering School is one of the bigger businesses in Talkeetna."

APD-D expressed similar sentiments, noting that: "The small numbers of clients we deal with often have a larger exposure to our community than day outing cruise ship tourists. Our heli-ski clients want a lot from their visit to Alaska. They often stay for weeks at a

time. They're not just visiting and seeing Southeast Alaska, they're intimately engaging in the place."

Although interviewed guides viewed the impacts of mountain tourism in Alaska favorably, international guides expressed mixed feelings about the impacts of their own work abroad. According to AMS-D: "The South American mountain guides support me guiding on their mountains. I've been there fifteen years. But increasingly, when Northern Hemisphere guides show up to work in the Andes, the local response is hostile. And rightfully so! We're taking work away from locals."

While some respondents acknowledged the possibility of negative impacts of mountain guiding, as a group they expressed overwhelming confidence in the benefits of big-mountain tourism to Alaskan communities. Along with economic benefits, big-mountain culture positively informs the community identity of Juneau and Talkeetna. Located on a spectacularly beautiful landscape that is a destination for exotic pursuits, these communities feel pride in their status as attractive and almost mystical destinations.

Guides were much more equivocal in their assessments of the benefits of mass tourism to Alaskan communities. They recognized the economic revenue that tourists generate, but noted that many of the values from mass tourism do not accrue to Alaskans. Compared to their clients, the guides were much more negative in their assessments of the impacts of mass tourism on Alaska communities. Clients on the other hand saw both big-mountain and mass tourism favorably, with more than 70 percent expressing belief that it benefits Alaskan communities.

Mass tourism clearly brings economic benefits to Talkeetna. AMS-F, a Talkeetna local, speculated that mass tourism seems less positive to mountain guides because they

do not relate well to the throngs of tourists who arrive via busses or the Alaska Rail Road. The guide reflected that Talkeetnans pride themselves on a being a little off the grid. Because Talkeetna is billed to tourists as quaint, small, and different, summer tourism positively reinforces the community's self-image. "I don't think Talkeetna is that different from other places," noted AMS-F, "but there is a cultural perception of independence. But without large-scale tourism, I don't know how anybody would be able to provide for his or her family up here."

On the other hand, APD-C suggested that marginalizing big tours, or any group of outsiders, appeals to locals. Juneau residents often complain about cruise ship tourism overrunning the community in the summer. Yet, "The cruise industry, even though a lot of money goes back to the boats, creates business opportunity in Southeast Alaska. Tourism may benefit clients more than locals. But, for locals who are business owners like me, it benefits the individual." A business owner himself, the guide recognized the economic benefits of mass tourism to Alaskan businesses.

AMS-F and APD-C were outliers in their positive perceptions of mass tourism. Nine out of eleven guides expressed negative views of mass tourism's effects on communities. APD-B recalled: "Growing up in Juneau, I had friends whose parents owned a small business on the cruise ship strip in Juneau. I know first-hand how challenging it is for private businesses to compete with tourism. With the increased property taxes, those folks couldn't justify keeping their store open."

AMS-D, a long time Talkeetna mountain guide, viewed the recent expansion of trinket shops onto Main Street negatively. He emphasized the outsider status of these businesses: "I don't know any of the transient merchants who have cropped up in recent

summers. I know they don't live here. They have the first shacks that visitors see when they arrive in Talkeetna. It's my hunch that money spent at them doesn't stay here."

Mountain guides are familiar with the positive outcomes of their work, and alienated by the large groups and less intimate interactions that come with mass tourism. Further, mountain guides are highly trained career professionals. The clientele they work with are successful and motivated outdoors enthusiasts. Work in mass tourism as a guide is less specialized, and participation is open to anyone who can afford the tour. Based on these factors, it is natural that mountain guides value niche tourism over mass tourism.

This discussion of big-mountain tourism in an Alaskan context highlights the nuances that motivate and characterize the industry. Mountain guides celebrate the Alaska mythos and think of themselves as pioneers of sorts on a final mountaineering frontier. Clients, on the other hand, are mostly interested in Alaska mountaineering for its exceptional geography and do not think of Alaska as a wilderness sparsely inhabited by self-reliant frontier individuals.

Climbers and skiers perceive the risks of their versions of the sport differently, with skiers more aware of inherent hazard. And skiers are more group-oriented, whereas climbers focus most on the goal, with esprit de corps a weak secondary motivation. Most paradoxically, guides perceive themselves as authentic representations of climbing culture, enabled by their employment but limited by it, too. Both guides and clients tend to view tourism as beneficial to Alaska communities, although guides express reservations about the effects of mass tourism on local communities.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

Alaska's wild landscape, rich climbing and skiing history, and cultural mythos of wilderness and frontier have helped it become a major destination for niche big-mountain tourism. The growth of the industry has been phenomenal, rising from about five hundred climbers a year in the 1980s to about two thousand today. Under the National Park Service concessions there could conceivably be as many as one hundred twenty five commercial Denali expeditions—each about three weeks in length—during the three-month climbing season. This dramatic growth threatens the self-regulating cowboy professionals of the region, demanding guides standardize, much as when other trades gained in popularity and transitioned from small-scale artisan specialization to larger-scale guild or union organization.

As a mountain guide and Alaskan, I associate adventure and challenge with Alaska's wild lands, and look to those landscapes for recreation and inspiration. That said, mountain climbing and skiing are pursuits of the economically privileged, and the importance of class and means are significant as data points for understanding how guides and clients understand mountain culture. Study participants universally agreed that pursuing mountain sport on the exceptional Alaskan landscape was their primary motivation for participation in big-mountain tourism here. A central tension in analysis of this motivation is an underlying assumption of authenticity on the part of the guides, and a complete disregard for that notion on the part of the clients, a difference in perception I attribute to class. As my demographics demonstrate, clients make on average twice as much as mountain guides, with more than 50 percent earning over \$100,000 annually.

It is a matter of economics that guides and clients work together, and this distinction is one of class identity. The career lifestyle climber or skier accepts significant economic compromises for full-time participation, and often works as a mountain guide simply to pay the bills. This climber/skier/guide sometimes reckons that she is the “real” version of mountain culture. Yet, without a clientele to take into the mountains, the lifestyle guide would be unemployed. Clients, on the other hand, do not need to work in the mountains to recreate there. Interestingly, guides tend to perceive themselves as more legitimate representations of mountain culture than their clients; yet they would not hold their positions without clients who seek to participate in this culture. I share this tension fully cognizant that my interviewed guides expressed very clearly their love of working in small groups. Guides’ feelings of *esprit de corps* while sharing the mountain landscape with their clients speak to positive group dynamics that regularly accompany big-mountain tourism.

Taking the “corps” literally, mountain culture offers participants a profound authentic experience, one seemingly lacking in a postindustrial culture, or limited to being commercialized or compartmentalized as ‘training’ or ‘exercise’ at the gym. The paradox of big-mountain tourism is it offers individuals a transcendental, sublime, but physical encounter—hunger, cold, exhaustion, etc.—that is part of a globalized political and economic system. Except for the guides themselves, the high mountains are generally accessible only to those who are at the high end of the socioeconomic spectrum. This is a sport for the wealthy.

Gender is also a defining characteristic in the big-mountain world. I’ve been teaching Outdoor Studies for eleven years, consistently with more female participants

than male, and almost exclusively with female teaching assistants. This gender demographic relates well with trends in higher education, as more women than men are attending college. However, as my data shows the guiding ranks and the clientele are overwhelmingly male, by probably a ratio of ten to one in heli-skiing, and more than five to one in mountaineering. During my own eight professional guiding trips on Denali, out of a total of approximately forty clients, only two were female. As of 2017 there are two female heli-skiing guides in Juneau, one of whom was my former student. There was only one ski guide at the time of my research and she was unavailable when I was conducting interviews. The lone female mountain guide I was able to interview reaffirmed my own observations that women in the mountains have to work extra hard to impress the overwhelmingly male clientele and earn their trust.

For guides both female and male however, the frontier mythos of intrepid and rugged individualism is a powerful motivator, an identity construction that relates well with the depictions of the region in early literature, and in images promoted by the tourism industry. Guides tend to imagine themselves as pioneers on a mountaineering frontier, an assessment that is in some ways political, and many residents of the state share these beliefs. The exceptionalism of the “Last Frontier” inundates the Alaskan marketplace. That level of mythic consciousness does not seem to be shared by most of the globetrotting seven summiteers or the cosmopolitan heli-skiing community, who might be in Alaska one month, and New Zealand, Antarctica, or Switzerland the next. As the survey results show, while they may come to Alaska because it is different, they are not as enamored by the frontier ideology so important to so many permanent residents.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Big-Mountain Tourism Survey for Clients

Thank you for agreeing to help with my Master of Arts in Arctic and Northern Studies research. I am curious about why people climb, ski and engage in other outdoor activities in Alaska; also, in why people travel to Alaska to pursue these activities; and finally how tourism affects Alaskan society, whether it is beneficial or detrimental to Alaskan communities. Responses will be used to understand how groups of people relate to the outdoors and Alaska. By participating, you are offering me informed consent to use your response. Information collected in this survey will only be reported as a group survey response, and your individual answers are confidential. Before participating, feel free to contact me at fjwagner@alaska.edu with any questions or concerns you may have. The survey is 25 questions and should take no more than 15 minutes of your time. Please feel free to write “don’t know” or “no response” if you don’t want to answer any question.

1. Gender:
2. Age:
3. State and Country of Residence:
4. Annual income (please mark one):

<input type="checkbox"/>	Less than \$25,000
<input type="checkbox"/>	\$25,000 to \$50,000
<input type="checkbox"/>	\$50,000 to \$75,000
<input type="checkbox"/>	\$75,000 to \$100,000
<input type="checkbox"/>	\$100,000 or more

For you, how important are each of the following reasons to engage in climbing, skiing, or other outdoor endeavors in Alaska? Please mark one answer for each reason.

		Not Important	Moderately important	Important	Very important
5.	I enjoy being outside.				
6.	I identify with environmental challenges.				
7.	I enjoy taking risks.				
8.	The activity makes me feel more alive.				
9.	I enjoy being in small groups.				
10.	I enjoy setting and achieving goals.				
11.	I can afford the activity.				
12.	Alaska is the last frontier.				
13.	Alaska is wilderness.				
14.	Alaska is pristine and untouched.				

15.	Alaska is different from elsewhere.				
16.	Alaskans are self-reliant.				

How well do your reasons for hiring a guide agree with the statements below?

		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
17.	The activity is dangerous.				
18.	It's important to be safe.				
19.	Alaskan guide services are professional.				

For you, how important are each of the following reasons for traveling to engage in outdoor activities?

		Not Important	Moderately important	Important	Very important
20	I am tired of where I live and want to see other places.				
21	I like meeting people with similar interests.				
22	I have wanted to travel and now can afford to.				
23	Travelling lets me see other parts of the world.				

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Please check one response for each question:

		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
24	Adventure tourism (like climbing and big-mountain skiing) is beneficial to Alaskan communities.				
25	Mass tourism (like cruise ship and bus tours) is beneficial to Alaskan communities.				

Appendix 2: Big-Mountain Tourism Interview Script for Guides

Thank you for agreeing to help with my Master of Arts in Arctic and Northern Studies research. I am curious about why people climb, ski and engage in outdoor activities in Alaska; also, in why people travel to Alaska to do so. Responses will be used to understand how groups of people relate to the outdoors and Alaska. Information collected in this survey will only be reported as a group survey response, and your individual answers are confidential. Please feel free to write “don’t know” or “no response” if you don’t want to answer any question.

1. Name: _____
2. Gender: _____
3. Age: _____
4. State and Country of Residence: _____
5. Annual income (please mark one):

<input type="checkbox"/>	Less than \$25,000
<input type="checkbox"/>	\$25,000 to \$50,000
<input type="checkbox"/>	\$50,000 to \$75,000
<input type="checkbox"/>	\$75,000 to \$100,000
<input type="checkbox"/>	\$100,000 or more

6. Why do you work in the mountain tourism industry?
7. How long have you participated?
8. What changes have you noticed, if any?
9. How do you prepare for and manage the risks in mountain guiding?
10. Are the clientele consistent year to year, or have they changed demographically?
11. Is working in Alaska different than other mountaineering destinations? If so, how so?
12. Are Alaskan mountain guides, those who have a permanent address here and live in the state year round, different than mountain guides from elsewhere? If so, how so?
13. Do you see mountain guiding as a niche form of tourism? Why or why not?
14. Is mountain guiding beneficial for Alaskan communities?
15. How does it compare with larger scale tourism? Is large-scale tourism positive for Alaskan communities?
16. Why do you think people hire mountain guides?
17. Why do you think people travel to Alaska to engage in mountain sport activities?
18. Is adventure something that can be sold?
19. Does mountain guiding relate, in your eyes, to human creativity?
20. To human curiosity?
21. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?